



IHSR Biannual Report

July to December
2019

Focus on Education in Pakistan

ASPIRATIONS UNATTAINED



Institute of Historical and Social Research

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Dr Tariq Sohail

Director
Dr Syed Jaffar Ahmed



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Institute of Historical & Social Research
Centre for People's History and Dynamics of Change

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Yasmin Qureshi



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Note from the Director

The Institute of Historical & Social Research is pleased to present the second bi-annual report pertaining to the period from July to December 2019. The first report which dealt with the first half of 2019 was produced with the announcement that we would seek to publish bi-annual reports regularly. The series of reports that were conceived at the time of the launching of the Institute itself in January 2019, got disturbed in the beginning of 2020 when the country came under the grip of the pandemic COVID-19. Though the Institute opted for different means including the work from home method to continue its work without much hindrance, certain obstacles and delays were inevitable. However, we are pleased that we coped with the situation well as one way of facing the challenge was found in the publication of a series of reports on the effects of COVID-19 itself. The IHSR produced some 30 reports on four major themes - Health, Education, Constitution and Governance, and Economy and tried to see how in these areas Pakistan was coping with the threat and the devastation of COVID-19. These reports were well received and we were happy to find some way to remain relevant and fulfil our commitment to the society. Now that this report on Education is also ready we would like to see it in print as soon as possible and would present it to the public soon.

The second half of 2019 witnessed some significant developments in the field of education. During this period students took the lead in highlighting their persistent issues. The contradictions and distortions in our educational system affect the students in one way or the other, it is, therefore, natural for the students to come in the forefront to voice their grievances and highlight the discrepancies and distortions in the system. One major demand of the students had

been the restoration of their unions in the centers of higher learning, particularly in the colleges and universities.

The students unions were banned during the martial law regime of General Zia-ul-Haq when the government in power found the increasingly aggressive posture and politics of the student unions threatening its authoritarian rule. In the beginning of the 1980s, as part of an all-out efforts to de-politicise of the society, the martial law regime struck at the students politics in order to silence the most energetic and creative voice of dissent in the country. Some four decades have passed since then, one can see where this de-politicised society has brought us to. In these four decades Pakistan has changed at a fast pace. Thus, on the one hand, one sees the spread of a strong consumer culture of the neo-liberal world, and policies of globalization promoted by the state itself; on the other hand, there is a complete dead silence: Trade unions and the working class' movement has become a chapter of the past; marginalised sections of the society have been made ineffective and docile; professionals have been relegated to mere professionalism; the kinetic energy of the youth has not translated itself into a dynamic force; the political elite has been confined to the drawing rooms; the country as a whole seems silent politically, without any talk of rights, or aspiration for change, and with the economic plunder of the country the elite and the upper middle class, is flourishing, along with a the section of the middle class that is trying to catch fast. So in this environment if few students show the courage to come out on the streets to demand some collective action for their rights it is by no means something that should be overlooked. A society needs to live with all its faculties in place, it desperately needs politics which is the only legitimate way for creating awareness and realising the fundamental rights of the people. The 2019's second half will go down in our history for here we saw some noticeable voices coming

from the colleges and universities for the restoration of their unions. Of course the powers that be would not accept it at once so easily, but for those who aspire for rights' activism, it is the only way forward. Our report covers this forward march, and it is believed that this issue would be resolved in an academic manner.

As to what place education enjoys in the overall scheme of things in the country is obvious from the budgetary allocation given to education every year. An elitist, overly centralised, and security focused state cannot take education of the masses as one of its major responsibilities, let alone the most important one. This is the story that we narrate every year, and 2019 was no different. In this year, what was seen, additionally, was the cuts in the budgetary allocations of Higher Education. This report covers the details of these cuts convincingly.

Then, there has been the language conundrum discussed in the report in detail. There has been controversy since the beginning as to what should be the place of Urdu in our country. The English medium intelligentsia, the civil servants and the other state functionaries, and the elite do not have any commitment for the advancement and development of Urdu except lip service. The language issue need concrete suggestions, it needs to be look upon in totality: the composition of the Pakistani society; the cultural and linguistic plurality it encompasses, and the rich historical linguistic heritage that the each region of the country takes pride in, makes it obligatory to give due place to the languages of the country. All these languages need to be declared as national languages. If this happens the resultant environment would not at all be hostile to Urdu which will remain the language of communication and the language that would bring the diverse people closer. And, of course, in laying down the linguistic scheme of the country, English being

a universal language would also be given its due place where it could connect Pakistan with the outside world and help the country to benefit from whatever good is there in the world.

In the end, it is commendable that Ms Yasmin Qureshi has researched and completed this report in an efficient manner in the present Covid-19 infested circumstances. Moreover the topics covered have been properly discussed in their historical perspectives. IHSR research assistant, Ms Fatima Naqvi's active coordination in this project is also highly appreciated.

Dr Syed Jaffar Ahmed
14 April 2021

Introduction

2019 ended on a sombre note. Covid 19 would not make its full effects felt till some months later, but it had already started darkening the horizon. Its impact on education would be profound. Schools and institutions of higher learning were yet to shut down as a precaution to halt the spread of the pandemic but almost immediately the inadequacies of a flawed education system were becoming apparent as institutions began to prepare for the long haul by shifting their focus to online education. While schools and institutions catering to the more affluent classes shifted to online teaching fairly seamlessly, government institutions and those catering to the needs of the lower income sector of society had no choice but to close down and wait out the crisis. In hindsight it is easy to say that never has the disparity between public and private education been as evident as it became during the pandemic. Under the circumstances the PTI Government's commitment to the digitalization of education,¹ as per its Manifesto, takes on a new urgency.

Enormous issues plague the education sector—22 plus million children out of school,² substandard levels of education in government schools, lack of trained teachers, and dearth of financial resources (at least in the foreseeable future) to cater to the needs of *all* school going children—yet, advances in information and telecommunication technologies provides the

¹Digitalization in education refers to the use of digital technology to teach students. This may involve the use of desktop computers, mobile devices, the Internet, software applications, and other types of digital technology to teach students of all ages as per their need.

²PTI Manifesto <https://pmo.gov.pk/documents/manifesto-pti.pdf> see Appendix 1

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government an opportunity to make education available to large sectors of the underprivileged while improving the quality of education at no great cost.

By their very nature, technologies are equalizing forces. By increasing internet speed, developing appropriate software and providing internet access for all, technological innovations can be used to overcome many of the constraints, geographic and otherwise, that disadvantage poor students. The biggest advantage of digitalization is the fluidity it provides. For example, the resources available online can be made equally available to all schools throughout the country regardless of the student population served, thereby bridging the gap between the public and private sector schools. Luckily, there are many applications available that provide instruction on a wide variety of topics at various proficiency levels. Moreover, applications can be devised to specific needs to better cater to the curriculum. Since digital learning is an interactive process, it provides a greater sense of involvement for children than traditional textbooks and classroom lectures.

Turning to digital education to reach the more remote regions of the country, or even to provide quality education in our teeming cities should not be such a formidable task because statistics show that Pakistan is on the brink of a digitisation explosion. According to Google, as of 2018 the country's tele-density was 73% with 48 million wired/Wi-Fi internet subscribers.³ There were thirty-seven million active social media users growing at an annual rate of 5.7% (Stats counter).⁴ Moreover, according to the Pakistan Census Data, sixty-four per cent of Pakistan's population is below the age of

³ Javaid Iqbal, 'Turning Digital Pakistan into a Reality', Sept-Oct 2019 <<https://aurora.dawn.com/news/1143549>>

⁴ Ibid.

thirty.⁵This, the ‘millennial generation’ as it is commonly known, is perceived to be the driver of technological innovation across the globe.

Again, to quote Javaid Iqbal

Rarely has there been a time in its 72-year history that a new approach (in this case digital and technology) held so much promise and potential and where, with a few tweaks in policy and improvements in IT and telecom infrastructure and connectivity, e-commerce, digital finance, education and agriculture, we can collectively make a significant impact on growth.⁶

The PTI government is well aware of the potential digitalization offers. Speaking at a ceremony at the Islamabad Campus of Comsats University, Shafqat Mehmood the Federal Minister for Education and Professional Training, said on 6 July 2019, that the government was committed to deploying locally developed Information and Communication Technology (ICT) based methodologies for improving school access, teachers’ training, and overall quality of school education. He further said that ICTs could be used for mass literacy programmes.⁷This sentiment was echoed by the Rector of COMSATS who said that by using modern technologies including hybrid teaching and holographic classrooms, the government can improve access to education even in far-flung areas at a minimal

⁵Asma Kundi, ‘Pakistan Currently has Largest Percentage of Young People in its History’, 3 May 2018. <<https://www.dawn.com/news/1405197>>

⁶Javaid Iqbal, op.cit.

⁷*The News*, July 6, 2019 <<https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/494367-universities-asked-to-create-skilled-youths>>

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cost by making mobile versions of the syllabus content accessible through apps.⁸

Of all the provinces, Punjab seems to be the only one that has taken some steps in this regard. On 20 February 2019, at an event at the Lahore College for Women University (LCWU), the Punjab Information Technology Board (PITB) announced the launch of an android application to digitise books. Textbooks from level one to intermediate would be available online through this app. The event, organised in conjunction with the eLearn Project of PIT Band, was attended among others by the Prime Minister's Task Force on IT. The PITB programme officer said that 28 books of the Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board (PCTB) relating to Physics, Chemistry, Biology, and Maths had been digitised on a priority basis. These textbooks have been augmented with videos, animations, simulations, audios, and assessments. This, the spokesperson said it was a practical step towards a knowledge economy. In keeping with the vision of the Punjab government to utilize IT to reach out to the maximum number of students.⁹ She said the PITB eLearn Punjab project was sponsored by the School Education Department and it aimed to develop and implement digital interactive free textbooks in collaboration with PCTB. eLearn Punjab has developed digital content for Grades 4-12 which is freely available on its website and the eLearn App is also available on Google Play store.¹⁰

While Punjab has taken some baby steps towards digitalization, there is much more that can be done nationwide. To start with, it is worth noting that although the stats on digital availability are

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ <<https://www.dawn.com/news/1464941>>

¹⁰ For more details see, eLearn website <<https://elearn.punjab.gov.pk/>>

impressive, they do not, and will not, automatically translate to digital literacy. To achieve systematic change, the government needs to develop a multi-pronged strategy that will involve various stakeholders in a synchronised effort.

Students Solidarity March

This quarter saw the holding of the second Students Solidarity March.¹¹ The march took place on 29 November 2019 in 50 cities¹² across the country, including Karachi, Quetta, Lahore, and Peshawar. In emotionally charged speeches across the country, students called for the restoration of student unions, and an end to the surveillance and harassment of students on campuses. The participants strongly condemned occupation of their hostels by paramilitary forces and the failure of the authorities to investigate cases of sexual harassment. Other key demands of the SAC included restoring the budget for the Higher Education Commission (HEC), stopping the laying off of academics, and the allocation of at least 5% of total GDP for education. The demands also include abandoning the privatisation of educational institutions, and taking back the Government's decision to increase fees. To sum up, the Charter of Demands included:

- Lifting the ban on student unions and holding elections for the unions;
- Ending the prohibition on students participating in political activities;

¹¹ The first Students Solidarity March was held on November 30, 2018 in Lahore, Islamabad, and eight other cities of Pakistan.

¹² *Dawn*, 29 November 2019, <<https://www.dawn.com/news/1519531>> Wikipedia puts the figure at 53 cities of Pakistan

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- Ending the intervention (in the name of national security) of security forces in educational institutions, and releasing all students incarcerated;
- Establishing committees to investigate incidents of sexual harassment and ensuring women form part of the set up;
- Reversing the decision to raise school and college fees;
- Abandoning the policy of privatizing educational institutes;
- Providing free education for all;
- Ensuring that at least five per cent of the GDP is allocated for education;
- Guaranteeing no more budget cuts for the higher education commission;
- Guaranteeing that no educational staff will be terminated;
- Abolishing the semester system;
- Ensuring that all universities have hostel facilities and transport, libraries, and internet connections;
- Modernising the education system along modern scientific lines;
- Setting up schools and colleges in the lesser developed regions of the country and increasing the quota for students from outside the main cities;
- Establishing research centres in public sector universities to study transition from fossil fuel energy to renewable energy;
- Announcing 13 April as a national holiday to honour Mashal Khan.¹³

¹³Mashal Khan a student at the Abdul Wali Khan University at Mardan, was lynched by an angry mob on university premises on 13 April 2017, over allegations of posting blasphemous content online. Later, following investigations, the Inspector General Police declared that no evidence of blasphemy had been found against Mashal Khan or his friends. In a written statement to the police, Mashal's friend, Abdullah, stated that both Mashal and he were devout Muslims and that they had been active in denouncing mismanagement by the university officials and had led protests against the administration. This is what apparently led to the lynching.

Regarding the first and second points, that is, the lifting of the ban on student unions and ending the ban on political activity on campus, students complain that what had begun as a ban on political activism has grown into an unending list of activities prohibited on campus. Students have no freedom to dress as they please, they have no freedom of speech, and have no say in hostel curfews, fee hikes, segregation, cuts in the education budget, etc. They have no recourse to action against intimidation and harassment by figures of authority. All these rights are effectively taken away from them by a particularly irksome practice commonly known among students as the signing of the ‘non-political’ affidavit.¹⁴

Across Pakistan, students entering into public and private sector institutions of higher learning have to render an undertaking that they will not take part in any political activity on campus and that they will abide by the rules of the institution and use the premises of the institution only to study. The affidavit has to be countersigned by a parent or guardian who swears that the student will not violate the contents of the affidavit. Some universities require students to sign the declaration along with two government officers of Grade-17 or above as witnesses. These witnesses are then required to verify the declaration with their signature and official stamp. While some institutions require the affidavit be signed after the student gets admission, others include the declaration as part of the admission form, thus turning it into a requirement for securing admission.

Typically, the student makes two pledges when signing the affidavit: one, that they will not indulge in politics or in any ‘unlawful activity’, and secondly, that they will strictly adhere to the institutions’ rules and regulations. Violation of the affidavit can lead

¹⁴All information on the ‘non-political’ affidavit’ taken from Naeem Sahoutara, ‘The Case for Student Unions,’ 28 November 2019 < <https://www.dawn.com/news/1515037> >

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to a number of adverse disciplinary actions ranging from temporary suspension for a week during which the student will not be allowed to attend classes, to rustication during which the student may not be allowed to enter campus premises temporarily, to permanent expulsion from the institute. Once this undertaking is signed and submitted, the hands of the student and that of their parent/ guardian are tied as they have given up their right to challenge any action taken by the university against the student in the light of this affidavit.

While broadly speaking the demands of the students are the same throughout the country, different provinces and regions have specific grievances also. For example, while several harassment cases have been reported from universities across the country none was as significant as the one stemming from the University of Balochistan where hidden CCTV cameras were installed in places like washrooms and smoking areas to record candid videos of the students and then to blackmail them. The footage was then used by members of the university administration to blackmail female students.¹⁵ There were widespread protests by students after the incident came to light but no action was taken against the perpetrators. Airing their grievances, students in Balochistan demanded the arrest of the vice-chancellor of Balochistan University for his alleged involvement in the scandal. Another issue specific to that province was raised by the Baloch Students Organisation (BSO) who demanded fair trials for victims of enforced disappearances.

The main complaint of students from Gilgit-Baltistan was the lack of facilities to pursue higher education in the region as well as the

¹⁵ <<https://news-communique.com/index.php/2019/10/28/university-of-balochistan-scandal-secret-cameras-in-women-washrooms/>>

substandard quality of education being imparted. Students from Sindh University protested against harassment by the authorities who were booked under sedition charges for demanding the provision of water and basic amenities at the university. Many students from private institutions joined the march protesting the 'price hike, dress code and harassment on campus'.

The participants were well organized and coordinated in this year's march. Learning from their experience from a year earlier, the students set up a Students Action Committee (SAC) at the national level to coordinate activities. Representatives of student organisations from Sindh, Balochistan, Gilgit-Baltistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Azad Jammu and Kashmir, and Punjab were part of the SAC and were able to coordinate and monitor the march in all the major cities this year. Speaking to dawn.com about the rationale behind the march, Haider Kaleem, a journalism graduate and a member of the Progressive Students Collective and Progressive Students Federation, explained that the students' solidarity march was based on a very simple idea.

Our lives and experiences as students are not good, so we all need to come together and change it through the power of the street because any other power in the country will never talk about us and our future. We must become a part of the decision-making process...It is important to march now because we have exhausted all other means to get these rights guaranteed by the Constitution. So, if the powers in our country do not understand why all these demands need to be fulfilled, we will have to come out and tell them why...We are not doing this for fun. This is about our lives and everyone's future.¹⁶

¹⁶ToobaMasood, 'Exhausted All Other Means, Driven to the Streets,' 29 November 2019.

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The students managed to enlist the support of their parents and professors, workers, farmers, trade unionists, and other progressive organizations like the Women Democratic Front. Writers like M. Hanif, and social activists like Jibran Nasir and Amar Sindhu joined the SAC-sponsored protest march. Political parties like the Communist Party Pakistan (CPP) and the Awami Workers Party came out in support of the students. The Awami National Party KP President Aimal Wali Khan, took to Twitter to announce the party's support for the march as did PPP Chairperson Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari. Ahead of the march, scores of Pakistani students studying at international universities had also voiced their support for the march. In an open letter addressed to the government, under the aegis of the Pakistan International Students Alliance, registered their opposition to the ban on student unions.

Student Unions

There is little doubt that student unions have played a significant role in the politics of the subcontinent from pre-Independence times¹⁷ till January 1984 when General Zia-ul-Haq's military regime imposed a country-wide ban on student unions. But unfortunately, over the last few decades, student unions have come to be perceived as organizations promoting political violence on campuses. This was not always so. There was a time when universities across the country used to have very active and vibrant student unions.

<<https://www.dawn.com/news/1519143>>

¹⁷The Muslim Students Federation (MSF) which was the student wing of the All India Muslim League, played a significant role in the Pakistan Movement. However, after the independence of Pakistan in 1947, the MSF, like its mother party, did not survive, and fractured into a number of factions.

After Independence there were many instances in which students played an important role in determining the outcome of a situation. For example, even though President Ayub Khan had banned student unions in 1962, it was the country-wide student protests that led to his resignation in 1969.¹⁸ Later on, the ban was reluctantly lifted by Yahya Khan as one of the oppositions demands he accepted in order to give his regime a lifeline.

The 1970s saw an increase in student politics across the country. The early years of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's government are seen as the most democratic period in the history of student politics. Several new student organizations sprang up around this time. This decade also saw the divide between the Leftist/Marxist student associations and Right wing/religious student groups intensify, mirroring the state of the nation. Both sides, however, also experienced in-fighting and splintering into multiple groups. For example, in 1973, the leading left-leaning student association, the National Student Federation (NSF),¹⁹ split along ideological fault lines—pro-Beijing versus pro-Moscow [TRT]—with the breakaway faction forming the Liberal Students Federation (LSF). Many believe that it was this split in the NSF that provided the IJT the opportunity to dominate campuses throughout the country.

In 1974, the Student Union Ordinance was passed. This Ordinance actually encouraged student activity on campus, and several

¹⁸Ironically the agitation against Ayub Khan further divided student politics for while both the NSF and IJT took part in the agitation, the IJT was focused on the agenda of Islamization of its parent party, whereas the NSF was firmly focused on its ideological leaning towards communism.

¹⁹Two key student groups—the Democratic Students Federation (DSF) affiliated with the Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP) and the Islami Jamiat-e-Talaba (IJT) affiliated the Jamaat-e-Islami, emerged soon after independence. However, the government imposed a ban on the CPP and along with it on the DSF in 1954. Following the ban on the DSF, the left-leaning students formed a new group called the National Students Federation (NSF).

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prominent new student organizations came into existence and grew during this time. But unfortunately, soon after, Bhutto—always keenly aware of any perceived threat to his authority—began distancing himself from student unions.

With the dismissal of the Bhutto government and the imposition of ML, all political activities on campuses gradually ground to a halt. On 30 January 1984, Zia-ul-Haq imposed a ban on student unions across the country. At first, the ban was limited to Islamabad, but by February the ban had been extended to the Punjab and then to the North Western Frontier Province and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa). In Sindh, the ban on student unions had been placed much earlier in 1979, when automatic weapons first surfaced on university campuses in Karachi and Lahore.

Zia-ul-Haq's pretext for banning student unions was that they were promoting violence on campuses. However, the ban neither helped curb campus violence nor did it affect all student parties alike. Despite the ban, the Islami Jamiat-i-Talaba (the student wing of the Rightist Jamaat-i-Islami), continued to flourish and was commonly perceived as being linked to violence and lethal weapons on university campuses across Pakistan.

Once the unions were banned, the Zia regime proposed that student councils and societies be set up in higher education institutions with student leaders of these councils/societies selected by the authorities and that Vice-Chancellors and Principals of the institutions head these bodies. This proposal, not surprisingly, went nowhere.

With Benazir Bhutto coming to power, the ban on student unions was briefly lifted in 1989. Unfortunately, the move was challenged

in 1990 through a petition filed by the IJT allegedly on the grounds that student organisations in educational institutions promoted violence on campuses. As a result of the petition, the Supreme Court through an interim order, re-imposed the ban on student unions on 1 July 1992.

On 10 March 1993, in a reversal of the interim order, a three-member bench of the Supreme Court headed by chief justice Muhammad Afzal Zullah allowed the restoration of legitimate student groups and union activities but with a condition: It ordered the government ‘to take steps for developing, restoring and re-organising a healthy students’ discussion and other activity in any form suitable to the individual institutions which might be called by any description.’ It further advised the government to make the necessary arrangements within a month of the judgement. It added that in case of any difficulty in implementing the order, the matter may be brought before the Advocate General concerned, who will then bring it before the apex court as soon as possible for further orders.

However, nothing has been done since then. According to Dr Tauseef Ahmed Khan, adjunct professor in KU’s Mass Communication department and a former student leader, ‘Ever since, several successive governments came to power in the last 26 years, but the top court’s directives are yet to be implemented.’²⁰

Prime Minister Imran Khan in a tweet on 1 December 2019, following the success of the student solidarity march acknowledged that ‘Universities groom future leaders of the country and student unions form an integral part of this grooming,’ but that unfortunately student unions had become ‘violent battlegrounds and completely

²⁰Naeem Sahoutara, op.cit.

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destroyed the intellectual atmosphere on campuses.’ He went on to say that the government was willing to allow the restoration of student unions subject to the establishment of a ‘comprehensive and enforceable code of conduct’ based on the ‘best practices in internationally renowned universities’ which would ‘enable student unions to play their part in positively grooming our youth as future leaders of the country.’²¹

Earlier in the day, Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Information and Broadcasting, Dr Firdous Ashiq Awan, had announced that the Prime Minister had directed the federal government and the provinces to form a comprehensive strategy for the protection of students' rights and for the speedy resolution to their problems.

Following the student march, Sindh government took a decisive step towards restoring student unions in campuses across the province. On 9 December 2019, the Sindh cabinet, in a meeting presided over by Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah, cleared the draft of the Sindh Students Union Act, 2019. The Act aimed at activating ‘an effective system to provide for the establishment of students unions and regulating them in the province of Sindh...’²²

The draft bill envisages a student union in every educational institution consisting of ‘bona fide students of that institution’. The union will be made up of 7-11 members elected by the students of each university or college in polls to be held every year. Each educational institution would be allowed to formulate its own rules

²¹<<https://www.dawn.com/news/1519856>>

²²Imtiaz Mugheri and Imtiaz Ali, ‘Sindh Cabinet Approves Bill to Lift Ban on Student Unions’, 9 December 2019.

< <https://www.dawn.com/news/1521331> >

and procedures for the conduct of their student union. Among other things, the union would:

- Work for maintaining social and academic welfare of the students;
- Ensure the rights and interests of all students are suitably represented and protected;
- Organise such social, cultural, intellectual or other extra-curricular events which help in forming a student's personality and make them responsible citizens;
- Promote and strengthen relations between students and educational institutions;
- Oppose and bring to light any discrimination or injustice that obstructs the social and academic life of students;
- Endeavour to make students responsible citizens, aware of their rights and obligations towards their country as provided under the Constitution;
- Play the role of a bridge between the students and the educational institution and its staff to further the objective of academic excellence;
- Coordinate and liaison with elected student bodies of different jurisdictions in the country;
- Assist educational institutions in maintaining discipline and ensuring teachers and staff are respected;
- Ensure democratic and inclusive atmosphere for healthy debate that respects opinions of all;
- Every university or college will have at least one nominee of the elected student union in its syndicate, senate or board, according to the draft law.

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The bill also binds educational institutions to constitute a committee for protection against harassment which will be gender balanced and have at least one nominee of the elected student union.²³ The Bill sternly barred students from ‘indulging in any prejudicial activity’ and possessing or carrying firearms, ammunition or explosives within the premises of an educational institution. The bill also stated that the students shall not indulge in political activities. The head of the institution was given the power to expel or temporarily suspend and deny entry to the campus any student found violating the injunction. However, the concerned student would be given a ‘proper opportunity of hearing’ in that the student would be able to appeal to the chief minister (or his representative) within 15 days. The decision of the chief minister or his representative would be considered final.

Before referring the bill to the provincial assembly, the chief minister directed the law adviser to seek the input of civil society, educationist and political scientists to make it into an ideal law which will allow the students to ‘breathe and flourish’.²⁴

While the Sindh Government undoubtedly took an extremely important step towards restoring student unions, the bill in some ways defeats the very purpose for which it was being passed in that it sought to curb student involvement in politics. As *Dawn* put it:

...even as it seeks to promote the active participation of students on the threshold of adulthood, the draft tries to curb some aspects of campus life. True, some caution is always advisable in all endeavours. But in this instance, the proposed restrictions go beyond what is reasonable, to a point where

²³ *Dawn*, Karachi, 9 December 2019.

²⁴ *The News*, Karachi, 10 December 2019.

they threaten to defeat the very purpose of having a union. The desire expressed in the original draft to keep the students away from politics may have been dictated by bad experiences of the past, but it is akin to a suggestion which allows enthusiasts to have a Basant festival without kite-flying. The idea is to expose young, educated souls to all manner of opinion and thought to help them gain a mature perspective on how to go about living their lives. The Sindh Students Union Act, 2019, needs quite a lot of rethinking before it can pass the test²⁵

Governments in power have always been wary of the power of the students everywhere, not just in the subcontinent. There are many examples of the influence an organized student body can have on the politics of a nation. Among the most significant ones is the student-led protests against the Vietnam war in the late 1960s and early 1970s when student protests changed the public perspective from pro-war to a strong anti-war sentiment. And there are many more examples, not the least being the bloody protests, again largely by students, in Myanmar against the military junta.²⁶

The present-day government's reluctance to normalise campus politics is also based on similar fears—that ‘woke’ students²⁷ could weaken their grip on power like they did in the 1960s, ending the rule of Ayub Khan. The underlying fear with regard to the restoration of student unions is that instead of engaging in issue-based politics, unions may toe the line of political parties that oppose the government in power. Unfortunately, this is a very short-sighted view. As mentioned earlier despite the commonly held belief that

²⁵*Dawn*, 10 December 2019.

²⁶ <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/12/fears-grow-for-hundreds-of-students-arrested-in-myanmar-protests>>

²⁷The Urban Dictionary defines ‘woke’ as ‘being aware...’ that is knowing what’s going on in the community on issues related to racism and social injustice. <<https://inews.co.uk/news/uk/woke-what-mean-meaning-origins-term-definition-culture-387962>>

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student unions promote violence, the fact is violence in academic institutions have increased since the crackdown on student bodies. The early 1980s in particular saw a surge in violence on campuses.

... [student activism against the military regime] polarised the country into two groups: one sided with the anti-regime student politics, the other, ideologically aligned with Haq, opposed them. The climate of intense hatred in universities and colleges led to violence and between 1982 and 1988 at least 80 student leaders lost their lives, according to a report published by Jinnah Institute, an Islamabad-based think tank.²⁸

The anti-military sentiment on campus led Zia-ul-Haq to launch a brutal clampdown on the left-leaning student parties, arresting their key leaders and activists. Paramilitary troops were deployed in the various universities and colleges of Karachi—a practice which continues to exist in some universities until today. This spiralling confrontation between the state and student bodies set off a culture of violence in Pakistan's educational institutions and had far-reaching consequences in the following decades, a significant fallout being the influx of arms on campuses. Writing for TRT World, journalist Zia ur Rahman quotes Dr Tausif Ahmed Khan, a Karachi-based journalism teacher and a former student leader:

Unlike in the 1970s and before it, when weapons were stored in safe houses outside the campuses, the increasing militarisation of conflict during Haq's tenure has led the students to store their guns in student hostels... today, violent

²⁸Zia ur Rehman, 'Pakistan's Trouble with Accepting Student Politics', TRT World, 8 January 2020
<<https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/pakistan-s-trouble-with-accepting-campus-politics-32797>>

clashes between student groups have become a regular characteristic of Pakistan's state-run academic institutions.²⁹

Aggravating an already difficult situation has been the growing influence of transnational militant outfits such as Al Qaeda and ISIS following the 9/11 attacks in the US and the increasing radicalization of right-wing sentiments in the country. There have been many instances in the recent past where students have joined militant outfits or have been lured into committing violence influenced by the intransigent nature of the propaganda of these organizations.³⁰

In the absence of free and fair student unions elections and the mandatory affidavit prohibiting political activities on campus, students in Pakistan have to a great extent become apolitical. The recent student protests show that rather than national politics, students are concerned largely with issues such as tuition fee hikes, lack of hostel facilities and libraries, the deep cuts to the education budget, and harassment—all issues that impact them directly. Alongside these issues, of immediate importance is the campaign for intellectual and political freedom in academic institutions. As Raza Rabbani³¹ says ‘Lack of interest in politics and political issues has...deprived [Pakistan] of some very fine political leadership’.

Student unions are especially important in country like ours where politics is dominated by hereditary and feudal politics. Unions used to be training grounds for students to develop an understanding of political issues, and to hone their debating and negotiating skills to

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ In one such case, a student stabbed his professor to death in Bahawalpur allegedly over the professor's support for a party to welcome new students. Since the party would include students of both sexes, it was deemed unIslamic by the murderer. *Dawn*, 20 March 2019.

³¹ Raza Rabbani, PPP leader and former Chairman of the Senate.

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ensure consensus-oriented solutions to issues. This vacuum that has been created is reflected in the current political setup where no student leaders have emerged to enter into politics in the last many decades, whereas history abounds with examples of students from middle class families--Jahangir Badar, Liaquat Baloch and Ahsan Iqbal to name a few-entering national politics through student unions.³²

The art of compromise, of the give and take in politics, is particularly important in multicultural societies like ours comprising diverse ethnic, linguistic and religious groups. Representation of students from diverse backgrounds through student organisations help bridge these gaps. When denied a natural outlet to political debate and discussion, students turn to sectarian, ethnic and linguistic politics as happened during President Ayub Khan's dictatorship which saw the emergence of ethnic student groups, such as the Baloch Student Organisation (BSO) and the Pashtun Students Federation, and yet again during Zia-ul-Haq's time with the rise of the All Pakistan Mohajir Student Organization (APMSO).³³

While not denying the importance of keeping the campuses peaceful, the fact remains that the three-decade old ban on student unions has done nothing to decrease violence in institutions of higher learning. Rather than fear students and potential violence the government needs to, in consultation with all stakeholders, work towards normalizing campus politics and allowing students their fundamental rights.

³²*Dawn*, 3 December 2019.

³³The name was later changed to *All Pakistan Muttahida Students Organization (APMSO)*

Higher Education

PMDC

In October 2019, in what was described by a former registrar of the Pakistan Medical and Dental Council (PMDC) ³⁴as a ‘coup’, the government promulgated an ordinance dissolving the PMDC. According to a news report ‘Police constables barged in and seized the building...’; 200-plus permanent and contractual workers were fired in the process.³⁵In place of the PMDC a new organization called the Pakistan Medical Commission (PMC), was created to be run by a nine-member body headed by a president. The stated aim of this body was to modernize the curriculum for medical education.

The dissolution of the PMDC and the subsequent issuance of the PMC Ordinance 2019 created great consternation among the medical profession. Not only did it effect the 200 plus employees of the council, it also meant that all medical and dental students after completing their MBBS or BDS would have to sit for a National Licensing Examination (NLE) degree in order to be able to practice. Even more worrying was the fact that there would be no control over private medical institutions who would now apparently have a free hand in governing their affairs. The ordinance absolved all private medical institutions of any responsibility towards regulatory statutes. Some believed that the move was made to favour private medical colleges who would no longer be bound by the regulations of the

³⁴The PMDC is the statutory regulatory authority that maintains the official register of medical and dental practitioners. Along with the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan it sets the education standards for medical and dental institutions in the country. In order to be able to legally practice their trade, all medical and dental practitioners and students are required to register with the Council.

³⁵ ‘PMDC Conundrum’, *Dawn*, 7 April 2020.

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PMDC including the cap on student tuition enforced by the PMDC.³⁶

The move was especially controversial because it came after an earlier attempt to pass PMDC Ordinance through the Senate failed because of objections from the opposition parties. In an op-ed for the *Daily Times*, Dr Abdul Razak Shaikh, a retired doctor from the Sindh Health Department wrote:

The route that was taken by the government to bypass the elected parliament on the issue has made the entire exercise controversial... it would have been much better for the government to have made a serious attempt to take the opposition parties into confidence on its proposals, instead of choosing the less-favoured path of resorting to presidential ordinances. Let alone talking to the opposition parties, the writers of the new law did not even consult the management of the public medical institutions, bodies representing doctors and other stakeholders before unilaterally and secretly implementing the decision.³⁷

The Ordinance sparked anger and unrest among doctors across the country. The Pakistan Medical Association (PMA), Peoples Doctors Forum (PDF) Sindh, Young Doctors Association (YDA) of Punjab, and the Pakistan Islamic Medical Association (PIMA) all termed the ‘decision undemocratic and appealed to political parties to reject the presidential ordinance.’³⁸

³⁶Dr Abdul RazakShaikh, ‘PMDC ordinance sparks panic among doctors: human rights violations observe,’ *Daily Times*, 1 November 2019
<<https://dailytimes.com.pk/492624/pmdc-ordinance-sparks-panic-among-doctors-human-rights-violations-observed/>>

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

To clarify its position, the Ministry of (NHS) National Health Services, issued a statement clarifying the purpose of the Ordinance. It stated that the implementation of the Ordinance would usher in an ‘era’ of regulation and control of the medical profession by establishing a uniform minimum standard of medical education and training and recognition of qualifications in medicine and dentistry.’³⁹

The ‘raid’ on the office of the PMDC was justified in terms of a move to ‘ensure the protection of the essential records and assets of PMDC.’ The statement reassured the medical profession that the offices would reopen after a week when the new medical commission would start operations. The PMC, the statement read would ‘be a body corporate consisting of (1) The Medical and Dental Council; (2) The National Medical and Dental Academic Board; and (3) The National Medical Authority, which will act as a Secretariat of the Commission.’

However, despite the government’s efforts to appease doctors, speculation remained that the government had acted to please the management and the politically influential owners of private medical institutions. Given that the government chose to act alone through a presidential ordinance rather than through the legislature fuelled the suspicion.

The registrar of PMDC, retired Brig. Dr Hafizud Din and 31 employees, filed a petition in the Islamabad High Court against the

³⁹Tariq Butt, ‘Dissolution of PMDC: Ordinance Disapproved by Senate Promulgated Again’, *The News*, 22 October 2019.
<<https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/544573-dissolution-of-pmdc-ordinance-disapproved-by-senate-promulgated-again>>

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Ordinance on 30 October.⁴⁰The issue had not been resolved till the end of the year.

Budgetary Cuts

In response to the budgetary cuts in education, the students in the solidarity march demanded that the government guarantee that there would be no more budget cuts for higher education and that no staff in institutions of higher learning would be fired.

The PTI Government had come in with great fanfare promising reform of the education sector.⁴¹The Annual Plan for 2019-20⁴² as drafted by the Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform included a section on higher education and was seen as an indicator of PTI's strategy for higher education.

The main focus of the annual plan was increasing access to higher education, improving quality and making academic research more relevant to national needs. The plan envisaged a three-tiered system of higher education: the lowest layer (Tier 3) consisting of colleges; the second tier (Tier 2) of the majority of universities, while the top Tier (Tier 1) would focus on upgrading the better universities into 'world class' institutions through greater autonomy and additional financial support. The establishment of new universities would be undertaken only after a need's assessment had been done.

The HEC will further ensure that funds are invested towards existing universities, with a fully functioning quality enhancement cell. The plan also proposes setting up a programme, called the Assistance Governance and Access in Higher Education for Quality

⁴⁰< <https://www.dawn.com/news/1533799>>

⁴¹See, PTI Manifesto <[https://pmo.gov.pk](https://pmo.gov.pk/documents/manifesto-pti)> documents > manifesto-pti>

⁴²<<https://www.pc.gov.pk/uploads/annualplan/AnnualPlan2019-20.pdf>>

Enhancement, with the assistance of the World Bank to improve academic excellence through support to students and researchers across universities and affiliated colleges.

Universities were also encouraged to generate resources and collaborate locally and globally to reduce dependence on public funds. Under the human resource development scheme, funds have been allocated for local and foreign scholarships, while also emphasising on research and development for universities across the country.

An integral part of the plan was to focus on emerging and new technologies, in order to embrace the ‘fourth industrial revolution’. For this purpose, a task force on ‘technology driven knowledge development’ was proposed to promote interventions towards a ‘knowledge economy’.

The plan also emphasises the importance of balancing investment in both technology and the arts and humanities and proposes the establishment of a social science arm under the Pakistan Academy of Sciences. Yet, there is an overwhelming emphasis on technological skills and education.

However, as often happens, the situation on the ground is different. The federal government slashed the overall education budget by around 20 per cent.⁴³ That meant all sectors of education—primary, secondary and tertiary—faced budget cuts. Of the Rs103.5 billion demanded by the HEC for the fiscal year 2019-20, the government approved Rs59 billion.⁴⁴ And for the development sector

⁴³*Dawn*, 15 September 2019 <<https://www.dawn.com/news/1505301>>

⁴⁴Kashif Abbasi, ‘HEC Spending Just Rs50,000 Per Student a Year: Dr Banuri’, *Dawn*, 23 October 2019.

<<https://www.dawn.com/news/1512418>>

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approximately Rs29 billion was given against the demand of Rs55 billion—a difference of more than 50 per cent.

The budget under the Public Sector Development Programme (PSDP) 2019-20 for the HEC is Rs28,646.882 billion, which includes Rs25,777.706 billion for ongoing and Rs2,869.176 billion for new schemes. The task force on technology driven knowledge development will be provided Rs4.297 billion for its projects.

Several universities in Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa already find it difficult to meet expenses. It should also be remembered that customarily, higher education in Pakistan is and has always been, heavily subsidised. This means that public universities rely on government grants for their running expenses, including payment of salaries and bills. According to some reports, the budget cuts could lead to nearly 10-15 per cent cuts in the recurrent expenditure of the HEC and up to 50 per cent in development expenditures.

Terming the 35 per cent⁴⁵ cut in budget as the biggest one in the country's history does not bode well for the higher education in the country, Chairman, Higher Education Commission (HEC) Dr Tariq Banuri, appealed to the Prime Minister for restoring higher education sector's budget as it was affecting ongoing as well as future programmes.⁴⁶ The chairman was holding the briefing following the proceedings of the 25th Vice Chancellors Committee meeting. Moreover, he pointed out, that each and every one of the 120 public sector universities were already facing a financial crunch.

⁴⁵ *Times of Islamabad*, 23 Oct, 2019<<https://timesofislamabad.com/23-Oct-2019/hec-pakistan-makes-a-key-demand-from-pm-imran-khan>>

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Amid reports of stalled programmes and the cancellation of many important initiatives, resulting from the budgetary cuts, a vice chancellors' committee comprising the heads of some of Pakistan's top-notch universities, called for an additional official grant of Rs10bn for these centres of higher education to cope with a worrisome situation. The call was made at a press conference after a meeting at the Higher Education Commission Secretariat in Islamabad. The HEC's chairman and vice chancellors of various universities across Pakistan requested the government to review and rethink this budget.

Ironically the cuts come at a time when many new universities, campuses, and colleges have been established across the country and students' enrolment has increased and when the government also increased salaries of teachers and other employees causing increase in the overall expenditure.⁴⁷

It was feared that the cuts would not only adversely affect the salaries of teachers, it would also sharply limit students' access to research and knowledge and access to scholarships. In particular it would prove disastrous to students from the underprivileged sections of society. Pakistan spends a meagre Rs50,000 per student per annum which is far lower than most countries including many African countries.⁴⁸ (Private universities, on the other hand, are spending Rs150,000 per student per year.)

⁴⁷ Tariq Banuri addressing a gathering at Mehran University of Engineering and Technology (MUET) in Jamshoro. *Dawn*, 1 October 2019
<<https://www.dawn.com/news/1508263>>

⁴⁸ Kashif Abbasi, 'HEC Spending Just Rs50,000 Per Student a Year: Dr Banuri', *Dawn*, 23 October 2019.
<<https://www.dawn.com/news/1512418>>

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Following the conference of the vice chancellors it was agreed to adopt a 2-pronged strategy—one, to engage with the government to seek remedies that would prevent the system from ‘falling apart’, and second to identify sources of funds to ensure the ‘future health of higher education institutions in the public sector. However, as *Dawn* has rightly pointed out, ‘the final responsibility of sustaining the universities rests with the state.’⁴⁹

Universities have already been asked to re-evaluate priorities within their institutions and look for alternative sources of funds. Far from ensuring independence of universities, in a context where government universities are not well equipped for fund raising activities, such alternative sources of funds may further compromise the independence of these universities.

Universities will also be reprioritising the focus of their budget towards largely marketable subjects, which despite the disclaimer in the annual plan, could undermine the value of critical engagement through the arts, humanities, and in some cases, social sciences.

According to the UNDP, 29 per cent of Pakistan’s population—roughly 57million—is between the ages of 15 and 29. They represent the hope of the future. The PTI has time and again spoken of its commitment to the youth yet much needs to be done to tap their potential.

⁴⁹*Dawn*, 8 August 2019 <<https://www.dawn.com/news/1498744>>

The Language Conundrum

In late July in a rather abrupt move the Punjab Government announced its decision to revert to Urdu as the medium of instruction at the primary level in public schools in the province.⁵⁰ The decision would take effect from the academic session beginning March 2020.

The announcement which was made via a tweet by the Punjab CM, Usman Buzdar, took many by surprise. However, the government justified its move by saying that it was in line with the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf's (PTI) manifesto which clearly stated that the medium of instruction would be Urdu at the primary level.⁵¹ English would be taught as a separate subject, a post accompanying the tweet said.

The post justified the decision made by the government by claiming that the provincial education department had conducted a survey of students, parents and teachers in 22 districts regarding the medium of instruction, and almost 85 per cent of the respondents in each category voted for Urdu.⁵²

The provincial government's decision was a reversal of the decision made by the previous government of Shahbaz Sharif (PML-N) making English the medium of instruction in schools. The decision had been made after 'exhaustive consultations through an education consultant...with the UK's Department for International Development and the British Council.' It was generally believed that

⁵⁰Mansoor Malik, 'Urdu to be medium of instruction in primary schools: Buzdar', *Dawn*, 28 July 2019.

<<https://www.dawn.com/news/1496641>>

⁵¹ Ibid. However, it should be pointed out that despite the CM's claim there is no mention of Urdu as the medium of instruction in the PTI Manifesto.

⁵² Ibid.

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it was this decision that had led to a large number of children from private English medium schools shifting to public schools.⁵³

The decision to revert to Urdu as the medium of instruction was not welcomed by all. Many expressed scepticisms. Speaking to *Dawn* a bureaucrat said, 'It took almost 10 years to make a decision to introduce English medium in public sector schools, and will take much time again to return to the Urdu medium instruction.'⁵⁴ Some felt the decision would further enhance the divide between the poor and the rich and that since in most cases parents were interested in sending their children to English medium schools this would lead them to withdraw their children from public schools in favour of neighbourhood English medium private schools catering to the low-to middle-income strata of society. Others, and many academics among them, are saying that the step would take the country 'back to the stone age'.⁵⁵

The Punjab government's decision is reflective of the bigger picture. On more than one occasion⁵⁶ the Minister for Federal Education, Shafqat Mehmood, has advocated for the use of Urdu as the medium of instruction in primary schools with English being taught as a subject. Given the government's stated desire to introduce a single national curriculum by March 2021,⁵⁷ and with it a single medium

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ To mention one instance, Shafqat Mahmood held a dialogue with a large gathering of academics and scholars at Iqbal Academy, Lahore regarding Urdu as a medium of instruction. *The News*, 22 September 2019

<<https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/568557-language-medium-instruction>>

⁵⁷ The website for the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training states its vision for the Single National Curriculum (SNC) as: One system of Education for all, in terms of curriculum, medium of instruction and a common platform of assessment so that all children have a fair and equal opportunity to receive high quality education. [The] Single National Curriculum is a step in that direction.

of instruction, the language issue has taken centre stage again. It is true that no definitive decision has been made either with regard to the national curriculum or the medium of instruction, but the Ministry insists that a decision is forthcoming once input from all stakeholders has been collated.⁵⁸

How the PTI plans to mandate a single national curriculum is not clear since education is a provincial subject⁵⁹ but sources say three main proposals are under review: (1) the use of English as the medium of instruction for all primary classes; (2) education in first and second languages, and (3) all subjects except English, Maths and Science to be taught in English while the rest of the course is taught in the mother tongue with teachers given the liberty to use the regional language in the classroom.⁶⁰

At the moment a medley of languages is used as the medium of instruction in public schools. Sindh for example, has adopted the regional language as the medium of instruction in rural areas but uses Urdu as the medium of instruction in the urban areas; KP uses English as the medium of instruction for the primary classes; Punjab plans to replace English with Urdu; Azad Jammu and Kashmir, English was introduced as the medium of instruction in all public sector schools in 2006-07.

Balochistan has perhaps been the most revolutionary in this regard. After a failed effort in 1990, the provincial government legislated in

⁵⁸Kashif Abbasi, 'Difference in languages in education system has generated disparity: minister', *Dawn*, 24 September 2020

<<https://www.dawn.com/news/1581276>>

⁵⁹Through the 18th Amendment, passed unanimously by parliament on 8 April 2010, education, and all aspects related to education—curriculum, syllabus, planning, etc.—devolved to the provinces.

⁶⁰Kashif Abbasi, op.cit, *Dawn*, 24 September 2020

<<https://www.dawn.com/news/1581276>>

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2014 that that the ‘government shall make mother languages as an integral part of pre-service teacher education and each student and teacher shall have the right to opt for any mother language.’ Furthermore, in addition to Brahui, Balochi and Pashto, the three main languages of the province, the Act also made it compulsory to also offer the children of other minority ethnic groups their universal right to education in their mother languages. Thus, children speaking Sindhi, Persian, Punjabi and Seraiki in Balochistan were given the right to receive primary education in their respective mother languages. It was a great decision in many ways. This is a unique step which no other province in Pakistan has yet taken. But unfortunately, there was a major flaw in the Act in that it did not make the mother languages the medium of instruction; instead they were introduced as ‘additional compulsory subjects’ which meant that Urdu and English remained the medium of instruction in primary education.⁶¹

The debate at the national and provincial levels remains focused on whether English or Urdu should be the medium of education. But in a country where over 74 languages⁶² are spoken, Urdu is as alien a language to many as is English; for the debate to be more comprehensive and reflective of ground realities, the discussion needs to be broadened to include regional and local languages.

Educationists and language experts have long been advocating the case of the mother tongue as the language of teaching at the primary level. The arguments put forward are logical and convincing. There is little doubt that a child learns best in his mother tongue or the language of his environment. As Ajay Pinjani put it so accurately:

⁶¹Sikander Brohi, ‘Mother Languages in Schools’, *The News*, 26 July 2015
<<https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/559096-mother-languages-in-schools>>

⁶²<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Languages_of_Pakistan>

When children are expected to learn, think, and produce in a language they do not hear, speak, or think in at home very early on, sometimes as early as on the first day of school, they are met with a burden which is discouraging at best, and unmanageable at worst. Adopting an unfamiliar language as the medium of instruction in early education is too demanding for a young child to cope with. This disadvantage disproportionately impacts children who simultaneously face other barriers to education, such as poverty, hunger, and poor learning conditions.⁶³

At another point he says,

A school language policy which does not provide children with an apt medium of expression, communication, and learning within the classroom crushes the hopes and potential of millions of children. We have created an environment in which the child is at a disadvantage from the first day, and that aggravates the conditions that lead to the child leaving the schooling system.⁶⁴

English, the importance of which in particular has been over-emphasised in education policy-making, is not the language our children are exposed to in the early years of their childhood. Many children, perhaps the larger majority of children enrolled in schools are first-generation school-goers in their families with parents who are either illiterate or barely literate in their mother tongues, but are

⁶³ Ajay Pinjani and Minha Khan, 'Understanding the Linguistic Journey of Pakistan's Children,' dawn.com, 14 July 2020
<<https://www.dawn.com/news/1568563/understanding-the-linguistic-journey-of-pakistans-children>>

⁶⁴ Ibid.

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definitely unfamiliar with English. This means the only exposure these children have to English comes from their teachers. Added to this is the fact that most teachers

are also new recruits to the English brigade and... they are not the very best in English. They also have many other failings, but requiring them to teach in the English language when they do not even understand and speak correct English is equally unfair to them as to the children, they teach.⁶⁵

There is no debating the fact that students find it very hard to understand subjects when they are taught in a language, they are not familiar with; by accommodating children and enabling them to study in the language of their environment [neither English nor Urdu] the government will be taking a corrective step towards the improvement of the educational system. Unfortunately, in some ways English and Urdu have become stumbling blocks in this quest as both languages are seen as essential for economic and social advancement. Thus, when a dialogue is initiated toward this end—that is the use of local languages in the early years of schooling—many parents see it as ‘a repudiation of the promise to deliver on teaching Urdu and English’⁶⁶ and the state is left dithering between Urdu and English as mediums of instruction to appease parental demand.

The result is a failure to develop a language policy based on reasoning and not on emotions. As aptly said by an educationist, ‘We have not worked out a plan for what languages we want to teach

⁶⁵Zubeida Mustafa, ‘Language in Education,’ *Dawn*, 12 October 2010

<https://www.dawn.com/news/571273/language-in-education>

⁶⁶Faisal Bari, ‘Language Mess’, *ibid.*, 22 January 2021

<<https://www.dawn.com/news/1602850/language-mess>>

our children, what languages we want to teach them in, and when and how we want to teach these languages.’⁶⁷

There is no arguing that the entire education system needs to be restructured and that there is a need to act but it has to be action based on careful planning and consistency. The process has to be gradual and ongoing and cannot be driven by showmanship and political agendas. We cannot continue switching between languages. Ironically, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government, led by Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf, had changed the medium of instruction in public schools from Urdu to English from April 2014.⁶⁸ As Shahram Khan, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Education Minister pointed out, it would be difficult for KP to make changes at this stage if it is decided to make the mother tongue the medium of instruction.⁶⁹ This is equally true of all the other provinces.

To reduce the confusion around language policy it would be best to rely on what educationists say based on solid research: instruction in the home language in the early years, introduction of other languages (Urdu and English) as subjects, and then a shift to other mediums of instruction, as needed, and when the children feel comfortable with the change.

It would also be pertinent to point out that language is only one of the issues plaguing the education sector and switching to local/regional languages by itself cannot be the catalyst for better learning. A case in point is Sindh. The Sindhi Assembly had passed a resolution in 1972 making Sindhi a compulsory subject in all schools across the province. But despite a lapse of 45 years and

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid., 28 September 2014 <<https://www.dawn.com/news/1134809>>

⁶⁹Ibid., 24 September 2020 <<https://www.dawn.com/news/1581276>>

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appointment of more than 80,000 teachers, the Sindhi language has not proved to be an effective medium of instruction. At one point, Hamid Karim, the Deputy Director Schools, commented, 'We have set up Sindhi medium schools in urban and rural areas which provide quality education to each student but people are not interested to teach their children in those schools.'⁷⁰ This is because decisions like these were purely political and no genuine measures have been taken to make a regional language the medium of learning.

Other factors related to the quality of instruction must also be considered. Lack of trained teachers, poor quality of textbooks, a penchant for rote learning, apathetic teaching etc are all factors contributing to the dismal state of education and that need to be addressed if education is to become the equaliser it should be. The government has to provide a standard form of education to all, regardless of the medium of instruction. The present system breeds inequality and entrenches poverty acting as divider of society.

Nothing splits a society more than the unequal availability of educational opportunities. A badly educated person cannot compete on an equal footing for a good job with someone from a good school. He will remain mired in poverty. Without resources he will not be able to provide good education to his children either because the private sector is beyond his reach or because the government schools are dysfunctional. In other words, a vicious cycle

⁷⁰Arshad Yousafzai, 'Serious Measures Needed to Make Sindhi Effective Medium of Instruction in Schools- Experts,' *DailyTimes*, 27 March 2017.

<<https://dailytimes.com.pk/20968/serious-measures-needed-to-make-sindhi-effective-medium-of-instruction-in-schools-experts/>>

sets in, of poor education breeding poverty and poverty obstructing good education. One perpetuates the other.⁷¹

Ultimately it has also to be emphasized that since the passing of the 18th Amendment, education as a subject has devolved to the provinces; it is for them to shoulder their responsibilities and come up with coherent and viable language policies in education.

⁷¹Zubeida Mustafa, 'Identifying Major Problems,' in Zubaida Mustafa (Ed), *Reforming School Education in Pakistan and the Language Dilemma* (forthcoming), Karachi, Paramount Books.

Appendix 1: PTI Manifesto

Chapter 6: Revolutionising Social Services

Transform education [p 44—46]

PTI will put in place the most ambitious education agenda in Pakistan's history, spanning reform of primary, secondary, tertiary, vocational, and special education. Since the devolution of Education as a subject to the provinces, a national consensus on critical matter of equity in education has been evasive. Pakistan's National Curriculum has not been reviewed or updated in the past 12 years, and no national consensus on medium of instruction and teaching of languages exists. The education budget allocation remains well below the prescribed 4% of GDP and poor education planning results in supply and demand mismatches. Nearly 22.5 million children are out of school in Pakistan and the ones who are not learning commensurate to their age or grade. The public-school delivery system is under-resourced and has capacity constraints. At the higher education level, research volume and quality are limited, and university administration continues to be highly politicised.

We will establish a National Ministry/Commission for Human Capital Development to forecast future domestic and international labour force requirements to increase or decrease supply of different fields of education, evaluate the curricula based on needs and trends of the labour market and develop a National Human Development Strategy annually to propose the supply of any new fields of technical or professional education.

We will establish a National Commission for Education Standards that will issue a revised "Minimum Standards" list within 6 months of its constitution and initiate a National Dialogue and technical

consultation to approve a policy on the teaching of languages at each level of education.

We will build the largest public-private partnership for education access in the developing world through vouchers for low-fee private schools & access to credit for educated youth to teach students in their communities.

We will create an Education Fund for young entrepreneurs to develop technology and communication-enabled solutions to provide access to education in remote areas.

We will establish minimum standards for all public schools to ensure provision of facilities and a child-friendly learning environment.

We will launch a nationwide literacy programme to engage 50,000 youth volunteers to teach literacy in exchange for university credits.

We will launch a Teach for Pakistan effort to bring high quality talent into the public system as teachers or coaches.

We will launch a large-scale teacher certification programme.

We will increase schools at secondary level for girls by upgrading schools every year in high-enrolment areas and launching nationwide radio, television and online self-learning programmes for secondary students.

We will provide stipends to secondary school-going girls to reduce barriers to access.

We will establish a National Steering Committee to enact examination board overhaul and move towards instituting a standardised central examination scheme and participate in the PISA-D.

Aspirations Unattained

We will launch a strategy to provide equipment, teacher training and competitions and co-curricular activities for students to improve instruction and learning of STEM subjects.

We will establish at least 10 technical universities in Pakistan to provide skills to our youth.

We will provide public scholarships and set up a National Endowment Fund for international universities, and provide international distance-learning opportunities for tertiary education.

We will attract foreign university graduates from Pakistan to teach and supervise research in local universities.

We will create partnerships with international universities to improve teaching and research quality and will incentivise research quality (as judged by international benchmarks) as opposed to research volume.

We will remove political influence and create an independent, transparent mechanism to select Vice Chancellors and senior administrators.

We will regulate university curriculum to include compulsory courses on communication, reasoning, IT literacy as well as instruction in social sciences.

We will transform the National Vocational and Technical Training Council (NAVTTTC) to a best-in-class organisation to plan, monitor and support provincial bodies in implementation.

We will streamline the role of provincial institutions such as TEVTA, Skills Development Funds, Boards of Technical Education and eliminate obsolete institutions.

We will engage foreign technical universities and providers under public-private partnership agreements to offer specialised, high-quality training.

We will expand vocational training programmes to provide relevant, high-quality skills to post-secondary students each year and will create partnerships with local industries and foreign governments to employ vocational and technical graduates.

We will map out and register all seminaries across Pakistan including information on finances, and introduce literacy and mathematics teaching as formal subjects within the Madrassah curriculum.