

# Freedom on campus

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It is unfortunate that the state has decided to stand against students, academics and civil society activist demanding the restoration of student unions.

The very purpose is to silence them from speaking on the deteriorating state of affairs in universities, and prevent them from performing their progressive role. The primary duty of universities is to advance our understanding of life, the world and the universe. To discover the truth, to transmit as much of human understanding as we can from one generation to the next and add as much new knowledge as we can to the existing store of human knowledge.

To realize such goals, academic freedom must constitute the core objective of our educational policy. It is a freedom we share only on campus, in the classroom — it encompasses a student's right to learn and a professor's right to speak freely and breathe easily. It is unfortunate to note that neither the HEC nor universities focus on promoting academic freedom, which to me, is the DNA of education. Universities serve as centres of learning through debates, discussion and rational analysis so that students can develop critical and analytical faculties.

Regrettably, we don't have this kind of environment in our universities which present more of an Orwellian society look where academic freedom is suppressed brutally, and vocal teachers and students are ceaselessly subjected to false propaganda, surveillance, and persecution. Seditious charges have been lodged against Dr. Ammar Ali Jan, Iqbal Lala (the late Mashal Khan's father) and others for standing with students. This is a despicable attempt on the part of the Punjab government to prevent students and academics from talking about national issues such as increasing poverty, yawning inequalities and corporate exploitation of our land and resources.

It appears that there is an alliance between the ruling elite and capitalists to prevent students and teachers from speaking on the vital economic, political and the constitutional rights of the people. In any society, teachers and students are public intellectuals and opinion-makers. Today, Pakistan is blessed with more than 60 percent of a young population aspiring for freedom and fair opportunities. It is time to tap into the potential of our youth to make Pakistan self-reliant but this is conditioned with how the youth are treated and to what extent they are empowered to work not only as productive agents in the development of science, technology and economy but as a bulwark against the corruption and mismanagement our universities are riddled with. The restoration of student unions can also lead to the end of student factionalism that always results in bloodshed on the campus.

The kind of thinking not freeing the youth, by and large, has roots in the colonial educational setup whose main purpose was domination, exploitation and accumulation. Clearly, education in our country, unlike in the West, was not thought

of as a means of promoting democracy or spreading egalitarianism, or increasing social mobility. On the contrary, its role has been to maintain the status quo, strengthen the ruling class and produce better rulers in order to reinforce the ideology upon which the power of the elite rests. Even a conservative educationist like Dr Ishtiaq Qureshi argues: “these institutions produce a corps of privileged elite, destined, because of its westernized training, the public service commission examinations being loaded in its favor, to rule over the despised ‘native Pakistanis’”.

According to Paulo Freire, education has a liberating function but in the context of Pakistan it has merely remained an inoperative part of our political system. The professed goal of education such as the development of physical and intellectual capacities of people, so as to make them autonomous, free, self-reliant entities, and to help them earn their livelihood with dignity, has never been part of our educational strategies.

The policies of the post-colonial, overdeveloped Pakistani state have largely mutilated the liberating function of education and whatever educational policies are designed from time to time reflect the aspirations and interests of the elite class, the aim being to control and dominate universities. In this regard, the state has taken a number of steps, including the colonization of universities by appointing serving and retired bureaucrats – civilian and uniformed – as vice-chancellors in ‘politically volatile’ regions.

We witnessed such appointments during the period of Zia and Musharraf. These appointments were guided by security and political considerations rather than any desire to improve governance and promote the quality of teaching and research.

To further tighten the control over universities, the Musharraf regime created a number of institutions like the Higher Education Commission (HEC) whose holy grail was to regulate and control the universities in a way that ensured that their functioning was in line with the ideology of the regime while ignoring basic values such as autonomy of universities, academic freedom of professors and restoration of students unions, which undoubtedly underpin the foundation of a strong educational system.

It is ironic that the autonomy of universities and teachers’ freedom to express their opinions are currently under attack and every attempt is being made to suppress the growth of independent intellectual thought on campus, for it is considered the antithesis to the ideology of domination and exploitation.

The history of such attempts goes back to the days of Gen Zia who considered liberal thought an anathema to his ideology. Basically, it was a hoax used by Zia to prolong his personal rule through draconian measures. Those professors who opposed his brutal rule were tortured, sacked or jailed.

At the moment, the system of higher education, based on elitist ideology, is leading to an educational apartheid in Pakistan. There exists a dual educational system right from primary to higher education; on the one hand, there are institutions where only the offspring of the rich can study and on the other hand children of the poor get education of inferior quality at poorly managed public-sector universities which are riddled with corruption, sleaze and mismanagement.

Under this situation, I would argue that academic freedom is key for the healthy growth of universities, teachers and students as it is academic freedom that produces 'creative chaos' which ultimately leads to what futurist Alvin Toffler calls "brain force economies", based on ideas and innovation and inclusivity, rather than dictation of a dysfunctional state to serve the interests of the ruling coterie.

And for the realization of the above cited goals, it is imperative that the state remove all the controls that have been placed on education, and let it play its liberating role in our society to breed independent thought and human beings free of bigotry and racial prejudices. This requires bold action on the part of the sitting government, and a major overhaul of the education policy.

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