

Pakistani Revolution: The Model of The Student Council

This spring, our student council elections were abruptly suspended.

Allegations of bribery and misconduct surfaced against some presidential candidates, and in the commotion that followed, the entire election process was handed over to a faculty-led committee. Not a single student representative was included in the investigation. Not one alumni voice was consulted. It was a decision made behind closed doors, about a student-led body, without students.

For many of us, it wasn't just frustrating. It was disheartening.

It felt like the university was saying we could be trusted to vote, campaign and debate, but not to handle our own problems when they arose. Not to reflect, reform or rebuild. And yet, these are exactly the things a student government should help us learn. What happened wasn't just about elections. It showed something deeper: a lack of trust in students. And this reflects something wider in Pakistan's culture.

In our country, power often stays in the same hands for too long. Older generations dominate decision-making, while young people are told to wait their turn, or more frustratingly, to trust their elder's judgement blindly and silently. That same attitude exists in universities. Students are expected to learn quietly, follow rules, and leave the important decisions to others. But if we are the future of Pakistan, why aren't we allowed to shape the present?

Universities should teach more than what's in textbooks. They should teach responsibility, leadership and how to work through conflict. Student councils are where many of us learn these lessons for the first time. But that's only possible if we are trusted to make decisions and learn from our mistakes. Giving students real responsibility doesn't weaken the university. It makes it stronger.

When things go wrong, like they did during this year's elections, the answer should not be to take away student involvement. It should be to improve it. Students should have been part of the investigation process. We should have been part of deciding how to move forward. That would have been a lesson in accountability. Instead, we were excluded from the conversation completely.

Autonomy isn't about letting students do whatever they want. It's about giving them the structure, the responsibility and the space to lead. But leadership also needs representation.

Right now, our councils are often dominated by students from similar (read: wealthy) backgrounds. Those who speak the loudest or already feel like they belong. Those with the money to put up multiple standees and have a campaign team clad in t-shirts with their face on them. These are the ones who get elected.

But what about the students who don't come from elite high schools, or don't speak English fluently? What about students who are still learning how to navigate a place where everything feels unfamiliar?

I think of the students in the National Outreach Program, who come from underserved regions across Pakistan, such as Gilgit-Baltistan, interior Sindh, and South Punjab, places often neglected in national discourse. They enter campus with dreams and drive, working just as hard as anyone else to get here, but also with invisible burdens. In many cases, they have overcome more than most of us ever will in our time at university.

But once they are on campus, they face challenges most of us never notice. Their food vouchers often don't stretch far enough to make it to the end of the week. The language and culture on campus can feel isolating. And when it comes to student government, their voices are rarely heard.

In 2018, Pakistan's tertiary education enrolment was just 9%, compared 26% in India and 48% in China (World Bank, 2018; Murtaza and Hui, 2021). Students from underrepresented rural areas face systemic disadvantages from the moment they dream of applying to university. Once they finally make it, the lack of support can lead to further exclusion. Despite government targets, Pakistan failed to meet its 15% enrolment goal by 2020, a sign that access to higher education remains unequal (Murtaza and Hui, 2021).

This is not just unfair, it's a missed opportunity. These students have a deep understanding of what access and equity really mean. They could offer insights that would help the council serve the entire student body better. But that can only happen if the council reflects the full range of student experiences.

A truly autonomous student council, built on democratic values and inclusive representation, could do more than manage student events or respond to complaints. It could push for meaningful reforms, such as preventing our university from introducing fee hikes every year since we enrolled, leading to an almost 50% increase from my first year at university to my third year. It could improve access to education by making the university more welcoming, more affordable, and more responsive to students from all backgrounds.

Research shows that student participation in university administration can reduce political tension on campuses, foster openness and trust and improve the organizational climate overall (Shahabul, Muthanna and Sultana, 2021). But for that to happen, participation must be meaningful, not performative. Students must be allowed not just to raise concerns but to influence outcomes.

I know change isn't simple. Giving students more control means taking risks. Mistakes will happen. There may be disagreement, or even failure. But that's what learning looks like. If we never let students lead, how can we expect them to lead when it really matters?

In Pakistan, we often hear that the youth are the country's greatest asset. But too often, that idea remains a slogan. What happens in student governments matters. It's where the next generation learns how to listen, to speak up, to compromise and to stand on the right side of history. If we can build trust and autonomy in our student councils, we're not just improving campus life. We're helping build the kind of democracy we want for our country.

So let us start small, but let us start right. Give students the right to run their own council. Let us make it truly ours.

References:

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Word count: 998 (excluding title and references)