**Who wants what and the way forward**

[Hassan Aziz](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/hassan-aziz/" \o "More Articles by Hassan Aziz)

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#JusticeFor Students, #OnlineExams OrWeProtest #StudentsKoInsafdo, #StudentsDemand OnlineExams. These are some of the most trending hashtags on social media for a few days now. We have seen hundreds of students of various educational institutes students protesting against university administrations. Some of these protests have also turned violent in Lahore and protesting students were attacked outside a private university by its baton-wielding security guards. As a result, many of the students had suffered severe injuries.

According to Dawn, Nawab Town police registered a case against 95 nominated and 400-500 unidentified students under sections 452, 506/B, 148, 149, 427, 342, 290, 291, 440, 436, 269, and 270 of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) and 16 of the Punjab Maintenance of Public Order Ordinance 1960, on the complaint of the university’s chief security officer Naveed Mukhtar. The Minister of Punjab cabinet for Higher Education Raja Yasir Humayun distanced the government from the whole predicament and said this is a clash between two parties (the universities and the students) and the government cannot do anything about it as the university has lodged an FIR against the students.

What do the students actually want? The year 2020 was spent in the hustle of covid-19 around the globe. This pandemic brutally crumbled the health systems of various countries and on the other hand, it also exposed the shortcomings and weaknesses of educational systems. The lockdowns caused extreme trouble to the academic careers of Pakistani students who lacked the resources and facilities to shift to the online mode of education.

Most of the universities are conducting online exams but few private universities are insisting on physical examinations. The students running the hashtag #WeWantOnlineExams argue that if they were taught the whole year, in online mode, why university wants them to take the physical exams.

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Is the issue so simple? Does everyone want to give an online exam? Students of a very reputable private university in Lahore held a protest and demanded to open the university. Have students always been in favor of online exams? No, students have been protesting against the online classes since June, last year and many of them were arrested just for asking for resources and facilities for online mode of education.

Here this fact should also be highlighted that students held mass protests against the abrupt shift of education on online medium without any consultation or taking into view the reservations of students from far-flung areas. The students were seen raising voices against online education since day one due to connectivity and load shedding issues and #SayNoToOnlineClasses was trending on social media for a long time.

Many students grieved that the online mode of education was organized mostly on Zoom and through WhatsApp groups. Classes were conducted on zoom through the 45-minute free link and after that class was abandoned. No one cared if the classes were completed or not that’s how most of the syllabus was left untouched. So overall the standard of online mode of education was pathetic. Secondly and maybe more importantly, the issue of fee which is highly undermined by the authorities as well as those who are reporting on this topic but is probably more important than any other issue. The students were asked to submit the full fee by the administration including the transport fee, lab fee, hostel fee, utility bills. The students demand that if they haven’t used any of these facilities, why are they forced to pay all of these charges? Similarly, many universities increased fees in the context of improving IT facilities in order to facilitate the students but nothing was improved by the university administration. Now the students are asking that this fee should be refunded or adjusted in next semester’s fee

Many authorities have stated that in online exams, the students will invent new methods of cheating and even called the protesting students ignorant and dumb. The students in reply to this accusation, have said that the teachers should make a concept-based open book exam just like held in some foreign universities.

Why these protests turned violent, and how can government cope with it now? Protests against physical exams are being held in different cities of the country and they turned violent after provoked and buttoned by university management. Many students have been arrested and also got injured in this violence. Social worker and Student Protest leader Ammar Ali Jan said that, “the students demand that exams should be conducted online, based on concepts where they have chance to score good grades or carve a middle way out of this crisis. Secondly, the fee should be refunded or adjusted because the students haven’t been taught properly the whole year.”

As the exams are approaching, this matter is also dragged out. As the public universities after discussion with the government, have announced the online exams, the students of some private universities remain in an uncertain situation. Here another question arises that why there is a single policy for all private sector universities? This is question must be answered by the government which came in power with the slogan of the betterment of the overall educational system for the youth.

The students have also raised a very interesting point here. They said that the management of educational institutions are often disconnected from the students and they don’t really know what the students want. This situation accentuates the importance of a very neglected issue that the students desperately need a platform in the form of student unions which can convey the demands and problems of the students directly to the administration. Arooj Aurangzaib, a social activist, in an interview with BBC Urdu, said that “these protests are held because the unions are banned till now. Unions are a platform to raise the voice of students collectively and convey their demands and grievances to the top tier administration as well as the ruling government.” She also added that “student unions are an important platform to do ideological national politics rather than issue-based politics, which dies as soon as the issue is resolved or s deal is brokered on the issue.” So here rises a very legitimate question that if there were proper student bodies and representatives today, would the protests be different from how they are today?

Throughout this fiasco, timely response and will to resolve the conflict between private universities have been largely missing. The government, which was dominantly elected to power by the youth to solve their problems, was supposed to reconcile the difference between the conflicting parties rather than beating and harassing the protestors through the state machinery. This state of affairs has left most of the students hopeless. Now the least government can do is to take back the criminal cases registered against the students, which can completely destroy their academic as well as employment careers in the future.

*He writes on social and political issues South Asia and the Middle Eastern region. He can be reached through twitter at @H\_AzizPK*