**[Prioritising youth](https://www.dawn.com/news/1809710/prioritising-youth)**

[Arooj Waheed Dar](https://www.dawn.com/authors/9951/arooj-waheed-dar) Published January 30, 2024 Updated 2 days ago

The writer is a senior research associate at the Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Islamabad. The views are the writer’s own and do not reflect the SDPI’s position.

Listen to article

FOR the last decade or so, development economists have been sounding the alarm about Pakistan’s youth demographic, saying that if not leveraged as an opportunity, it could turn into a ticking time bomb. Ominously, the ticking time bomb appears set to explode, pumped with ammunition in the form of propaganda and action against, arguably, the only politician in recent times that the youth have resonated with.

Banning the PTI founder’s mention on the media, confiscating the party’s electoral sign, imprisoning its leadership, and obstructing its election campaign are measures that have turned a major party into a victim in the eyes of a large part of the electorate. Those responsible for these actions perhaps forget the power of sympathy votes. Had the PTI been allowed to complete its term, its poor economic performance would have been enough to keep it from returning to power. But that was not an option for its powerful detractors.

There are concerns that in this situation the party’s youth following will have few qualms about resorting to violence, propaganda, or other extreme measures if encouraged in this direction by the politicians they support. This is the rotten fruit that years of not investing in the youth has borne. Unfortunately, the youth demographic has yet to realise the impact of the controversial economic policies implemented by the PTI when it was in power.

To counter the negativity propagated by the PTI government, a well-thought-out strategy is needed. This is not the 20th century where censorship, media crackdowns, arrests, and other intimidatory tactics are going to silence people. Stifling and suffocating the voice of the youth is only going to make them more rebellious. In fact, it is for this very reason that they have come to see the PTI as a symbol of resistance against injustices and the absence of equal opportunities over the years.

The importance of the three E’s cannot be overemphasised.

With elections coming up, there is a serious need for policymaking circles to reconsider the direction they want to take the country in, especially with regard to the youth. Addressing the youth at conferences to emphasise the importance of democratic governments simply doesn’t cut it. What is needed is a strategic policy to address the issues of growing intolerance in society by focusing on the three E’s education, employment, and entrepreneurship.

Poor educational outcomes and dearth of employment opportunities have adversely impacted the employability of the youth, becoming the root cause of intolerance in society. With youth unemployment on the rise, there is a need to develop vocational training programmes that establish direct connections with employment opportunities within key industries, and abroad in countries that require trained workers. The content of these courses should meet international standards, and must be offered both in person and online to ensure inclusivity.

Schemes that incentivise students to study harder, such as merit-based scholarships, tuition reimbursement programmes, and technology and gadget incentives should be expanded. In this regard, the laptop scheme was a good initiative which needs to be reintroduced. Educational travel grants should be provided to students who do well in academics. These grants can be offered with a view to facilitating participation in workshops, short courses, and conferences, and thus encouraging an environment that promotes re­­search and innovation.

To help cre­­ate em­­ployment opportunities, a series of reforms that facili­t­a­­te financial inclusion and innovation ne­ed to be undertaken to cultivate a conducive at­mosphere for the gro­wth of a start-up culture. Viable and innovative business proposals from young minds at the grassroots level should have equal and unrestricted access to capital, enabling them to launch their own entrepreneurial ventures. Programmes and digital applications can be launched to link budding entrepreneurs with potential investors and mentors for guidance and financial assistance.

Most importantly, equitable digitalisation must be ensured so that youth across Pakistan can have access to online education, employment, and e-commerce opportunities.

This is a crucial concern that demands the collective effort of the politicians in the country, regardless of the issues that create divisions among them. They must agree on the core concept of the three Es in order to chalk a way forward for the youth of Pakistan. They must realise that channelising the youth’s energy in the right direction is both a moral obligation, and a socioeconomic imperative.

*The writer is a senior research associate at the Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Islamabad. The views are the writer’s own and do not reflect the SDPI’s position.*

*Published in Dawn, January 30th, 2024*