



BACKGROUND PAPER

July 2005

YOUTH AND POLITICS IN PAKISTAN

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Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development And Transparency
House No. 7, 9th Avenue, F-8/1, Islamabad, Pakistan
Tel: (+92-51) 111-123-345; Fax: (+92-51) 226-3078
E-mail: info@pildat.org; URL: www.pildat.org



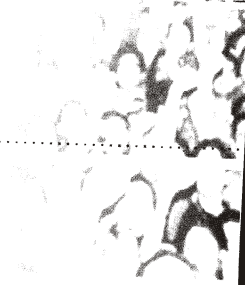
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BACKGROUND PAPER**YOUTH AND POLITICS
IN PAKISTAN****PREFACE**

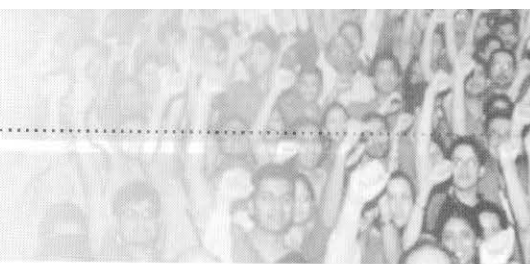
Why should the youth be interested in politics and what are the avenues available for youth's interest and participation in politics are the two main questions that this background paper attempts to answer for the youth in Pakistan.

The need for youth's interest in politics as a means of involving today's young in tomorrow's democracy can not be over-emphasised. Political participation by citizens is considered a pre-requisite for successful democratic societies. In a democracy, the young need to assume their civic responsibility as participating citizens in the common good, and therefore, in political activity. In the case of a developing democracy like Pakistan, this participation on the part of youth is of paramount importance.

This paper provides an overview of youth's political participation around the world, what the young require to know as participating citizens in a democracy and what are the available avenues for the youth to participate in politics. The objective of this paper is to generate a well-informed debate among the youth in particular and society in general on the subject of youth and politics in the country.

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1. Youth and Society

Youth are an integral part of any society. Participation in civil society activities assures that youth are keenly engaged in shaping their future. Young people need to be involved in decision-making processes that help to shape their own socio-economic environment.

The draft of the youth policy for the year 2005, by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth Affairs, defines youth as "Period of transformation from family dependent childhood to independent adulthood and integration in the society as a useful citizen." The age bracket for the youth, as defined by the policy, is anything between 13 and 29 years. According to the lexicographical definition, youth is the time of life between childhood and maturity. Without overemphasizing the importance of youth in an individual's life, this period is marked by the making of conscious decisions that decide the future course of one's life. From a broader perspective, these conscious decisions translate in to the future direction our nation as a whole adopts.

Thus youth is the backbone of a society and plays a major role in shaping up a mature, conscientious society. A society is an amalgamation of various social groups, and youth makes up a heterogeneous group within this society, reflecting more or less the material and spiritual divisions in that society. However, it is identifiable as youth not merely for its age group and statistical preponderance, but also for certain social characteristics which are peculiar to it. The youth of today are the representatives of tomorrow and the future of a society depends on how its youth is moulded. This age bracket is characterised by youthful energy,

curiosity, uncontrolled enthusiasm, ambition, creativity and promise; only by channelising this energy and enthusiasm that they exude, can a society ever dream to prosper and thrive.

Neglecting the need to cast the youth of today into industrious citizens of tomorrow may be a grave misfortune of a nation and an unredeemable mistake. Thus under the tutelage of the older generation, this youthful vigour must be given vent so that the youth embraces its future with confidence and self belief and does not flinch from its responsibility as the future torchbearer of the nation.

2. Youth Population in Pakistan and around the world

The demographics, in terms of youth population, differ invariably in different regions of the world. Between 1995 and 2005, the global youth population, as defined between 15 and 24 years of age, has grown from 1,025 million to 1,153 million. Young people currently comprise 18 per cent of the world population.¹ Following paragraphs carry population ratio of youth with respect to the overall population in Pakistan and in various countries across the world.

2.1 Pakistan

According to Pakistan's population census of 1998, there were 34.3 million young persons between the ages of 15 to 29 years. Based on the estimate of the Bureau of Statistics, Pakistan, the total population in 2001 was 133.65 Million out of which the young men and women between the age

TABLE 1: YOUTH POPULATION IN PAKISTAN - 1998 CENSUS

Age cohort	Total No. of youth	Male	Female	Total %
15-19	13.2 million	6.8 million	6.4 million	10.40%
20-24	11.5 million	5.8 million	5.7 million	9.01%
25-29	9.6 million	5 million	4.6 million	7.50%
15-29	34.3 million	17.6 million	16.7 million	26.91%

Source: Draft Youth Policy 2005

01. World Youth report, 2005

15 and 29 numbered 36.71 Million which corresponds to a little over 27 % - about 33 % higher than the world average percentage of youth. The draft Youth Policy estimates population of about 152 million in 2004-05, the young women and men number over 52 million today² which comes to around 29 % of the population.

2.2 United States

CIRCLE, Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning, November 2000, estimates that the US population between the ages of 18-30, who fall in the category of the voting age population, is 17.7% of the total population of the country.

2.3 India

India defines its youth as individuals between the age group 13 to 35 years³. According to 1996 Census projections, the percentage of youth in the total population is estimated to be about 37%, which is likely to grow to about 40% by the year 2016.

2.4 Malaysia

Malaysia defines its youth population as those individuals in the age group of 15-24 years and according to a report published in 2005, this age group comprises 19.1 per cent of the overall population of the country⁴.

2.5 Canada

According to the 2004 population characteristics, Canada has a youth population of 20.5% between the age bracket of 15-29 years⁵.

2.6 Significance of High Youth Ratio in Pakistan

Looking at the above statistics, it is not difficult to realise the significant youth population in Pakistan with respect to other countries of the world. With a population ratio of anywhere between 27 and 29 %, this is indeed a figure to be reckoned with. All societies pay special attention to their youth. But with such high proportion of youth, as in the case of Pakistan, the responsibility on the shoulders of a society to shape the youth into assiduous citizens, increases manifold.

3. Young Voters

The voting age in Pakistan has been brought down from 21 to 18 years as per Article 7A of the "Conduct of General Elections Order, 2002," which provides that a citizen, who has attained the age of eighteen years on the first day of January, 2002, shall be eligible to vote and the Chief Election Commissioner shall cause the electoral rolls to be prepared accordingly⁶. This change in the minimum age of voters was made before the General Elections held on October 10, 2002. As a result of this amendment, the number of eligible voters in the country increased by 5.2 million in 2002. Regardless of the voter turnout of the youth in these elections; youth have been empowered with the tools to play a significant role in political affairs of the country. This age bracket reflects the category of individuals who are at the threshold of making a career choice for themselves and taking the first step in to the practical world. But providing the youth with this tool has little significance without their cognizance with the political system, the various political parties and their manifestos, so that they can make a conscious, independent and informed decision regarding the exercise of their new-found right to vote. The true importance of this empowerment will only bear fruit if collective effort is made by the society with regards to educating them about the prevalent political system and making them aware of their role in the political development of the country. By reducing the minimum voting age to 18 years, Pakistan has joined an overwhelming and expanding list of countries who have already opted to lower the minimum voting age to 18 years. These countries include many of our neighbours such as India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Iran and Turkey. Countries like USA, UK and Germany are also in the same list.

4. What youth should know about Politics as a voter?

Political participation by citizens is considered a prerequisite for successful democratic societies. Youth, being an important part of society, need to be aware of how the system of government functions, in order to be

02. Draft Pakistan Youth Policy, 2005

03. National Youth Policy of India, 2003

04. <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/APCITY/UNPAN017520.pdf>

05. <http://www40.statcan.ca/01/cst01/demo10a.htm?sdi=age%20population>

06. General Elections, 2002, Report (vol. 1), Election Commission of Pakistan.

contributing members of the society. Political awareness generates a sense of responsibility among the youth and empowers them to make educated decisions about their choice of government.

In order to be in that position the young people need to be aware of how the political system works. They should be knowledgeable about the different levels of governance, i.e., the local, provincial and the federal level. They must have an understanding of the three major branches of the state, namely the judiciary, the executive and the legislature. An understanding of the electoral system, involving the election commission and the whole electoral process will give them a fair idea about the conduct of elections in the country and they will acquaint themselves with the procedure of getting enrolled in the voters list.

Beside, in order to exercise their right to vote it is important for a voter to be aware of the various mainstream political parties and know their manifestos before casting their vote. For a more informed decision, it is recommended that they talk to the local, and where possible, national leadership of various political parties, study their track record in the past and choose a candidate who they most closely relate to.

5. Students' Politics and Ban on Students' Unions

Students Unions elected by students existed in colleges and universities in Pakistan since the independence in 1947. With the passage of time, students in general and Students' Unions in particular became very active and involved in the national politics. Polarisation in the national politics permeated to Students' Unions and violence also infiltrated into the students' politics. The situation started seriously affecting the academic cycle of the institutions and violence led to deaths on the campuses. Proxy organisations of various political parties openly operated in the educational institutions. It was in this background that Martial Law Government of General Zia ul Haq, instead of reforming the system, opted for the easier way out and banned the Students Unions in February 1984. Despite the practical ban on students unions in Pakistan for the past 20 years,⁷ the subject stirs passionate views both for and against this ban and the larger question of students' involvement into politics. After Martial Law was lifted, the

ban was challenged in the court of law. Supreme Court held that the ban on the Students Unions was against the fundamental rights and asked the government, administrations of the educational institutions and students to work out a code of conduct regarding the election and operation of Students Unions. Such a code of conduct could not be evolved ever since and therefore the ban practically continues to this day. Some educational institutions especially the professional education institutions require the students (and, in some cases, their parents/guardians) to sign an affidavit on a legal paper at the time of admission promising that they would not take part in politics while they are students of the institution.

The two points of view on this issue, diametrically opposed to each other, proffer various reasons as to why the Students' Unions should or should not be allowed.

The point of view that favours a ban on the Students' Unions rests on the arguments that since student unions become involved in violent activities and disrupt normal academic atmosphere in academic institutions, these should not be allowed to be formed. Moreover, it is argued that the students should devote their entire attention to their studies which, in this age of increasing importance of knowledge and skills, are of overwhelming importance. Having equipped themselves with all the knowledge and wisdom they can gather, they will then have enough time to learn about politics to their heart's content. It is also said that Students' Unions in other countries mainly deal with the issues relating to students' welfare relating to social, emotional, psychological, financial matters or those of accommodation, examination, study and access to facilities, etc. However, in Pakistan, students unions have displayed larger interest in partisan politicking, parent political parties and violence. It is also argued that the students unions led to some of the worst violence at campus leading to many deaths. It is also alleged that a number of students' leaders who emerged through the students' union elections harassed the administration and teachers of the institution for their personal benefits such as improved grades at examinations, etc.

The other view suggests that without students' involvement into an electoral process at campuses, a vacuum in both political understanding of the youth and young political

07. <http://www.jang.com.pk/thenews/feb2004-daily/09-02-2004/metro/k11.htm>

leadership is created in the country. Political leadership emerges from students and hence youth's involvement into politics creates a political cadre in the country that forms political leadership of the future. Civil Society, of which youth is an essential part, can not discharge its duties as conscientiously as it should without political training⁸, which holds true for the students as well. Students unions provide an ideal training ground for this leadership and student politics is one good way to create a new class of politicians who can potentially become part of Pakistan's democratic infrastructure which is currently dominated by elites. Criticising the ban on students unions, the proponents of this view believe that the ban has in fact contributed to ethnic and tribal politics in students groups where instead of ideological positions before, punjabi students gang together against Pakhtoon students, Muhajirs versus Sindhis and Shias versus Sunnis, etc. The ban has also contributed to an increase in violence in academic institutions, it is argued. Students unions have promoted academic, cultural and political thinking over the last 40 years and student bodies had played a major role in the struggle for the independence of Pakistan⁹, it is argued. It is ironic, they believe, that while the youths of 18 years of age have the right to vote, they do not have the right to elect their representatives from among their own fraternity - the students. Proponents of this view believe that the ban imposed on student unions was in violation of the constitution¹⁰ as under Article 17 of the constitution, every citizen has a right to form associations or unions.

Both the above views carry strong arguments. Probably, the time has come to take a fresh look at the entire issue. While no one can support disruption of academic peace in educational institutions or proxy wars of political parties in campuses, the need for healthy students' activities at these institutions is crucial. Exposure to electoral process, organising campaigns for students' union elections, developing manifestoes and working for the collective good during the student life can better prepare citizens for their civic duties in practical life. An initiative needs to be taken to evolve a consensus among students, administrations of educational institutions, teachers and the government on how students' activities be channelised on the right lines eliminating the possibilities of violence,

academic disruption and infiltration of political parties in the campuses.

Students beyond 18 years of age however are free to participate in political activities outside the campuses and for that purpose they should operate in a sphere different from their educational institutions. Political activity which is not related to students welfare should stay off-campus and not be mixed with students politics.

6. Youth and its Perception of Politics

Many young people fail to see how the issues being discussed by politicians and candidates affect their own lives and the communities in which they live. Few candidates directly engage young audiences due to the fact that young people, particularly between the ages of 18 and 25, have the lowest voter turnout of any age group on average in any given election¹¹. This exacerbates a vicious cycle, where as candidates do not engage young people due to the fact that they do not vote, and young people do not vote because candidates and politicians do not address those issues that are important to them. Candidates focus on issues that interest large voting populations, such as the relatively older voters.

A recent poll on a web site¹² puts the youth perspective on politics rather aptly. The web site states that 37% of their readers indicated that the lack of education about the need for political activism is the reason why Pakistani youth are not involved in politics. The survey question asked was *Why are the Youth not Visible in Pakistani Politics?*

Relative disinterest of youth in electoral politics is not a localised phenomenon. The following table provides some interesting facts about the voter turnout of youth between the age group of 18-29 and higher age groups among some countries of Western Europe.

The voter turnout among the youth appears relatively high in most of these countries. However, comparing these statistics with the voting trends among the people in higher age groups brings to light the fact that, as a general trend, voter turnout has been low among the youth. Youth turnout at elections in the US also trails the overall turnout. This

08. <http://www.dawn.com/2005/01/09/nat20.htm>

09. <http://nation.com.pk/daily/may-2005/1/nationalnews8.php>

10. <http://www.jang.com.pk/thenews/feb2004-daily/25-02-2004/metro/k8.htm>

11. <http://www.politixgroup.com/comm8.htm>

12. http://www.yespakistan.com/newsletter/archive_display.asp?ID=69#poll

TABLE 2: VOTER TURNOUT OF YOUTH IN WESTERN EUROPE

Sr. No.	Country	18-29 years	30-39 years	40 - 49 years	50-59 years	60-69 years	70 or older
1	Belgium	96.7	96.9	97.6	97.9	95.6	93.5
2	Denmark	86	93.8	92	93.7	91.7	89.2
3	Finland	68.6	84.4	92.9	93.6	96.1	90.1
4	France	63.3	79.8	83.9	86.4	91.9	93.6
5	Germany	84.8	90.5	92.1	93.6	93	93.4
6	Great Britain	81	88.4	89.4	88.7	90	89.4
7	Greece	88.5	98.9	98	100	98.1	97.4
8	Ireland	64.1	89.2	92.2	96.1	96.9	90.5
9	Italy	95.4	97	97.8	98.7	96.7	89.3
10	The Netherlands	86.2	93.5	96	96.1	94.8	92.5
11	Norway	75.9	85.4	89.4	89.1	93.5	93
12	Portugal	63.7	84.6	93.2	89.3	93.5	90
13	Spain	80.6	85.1	89.9	88.8	90.5	84.3
14	Sweden	89.3	93.3	95.6	96.8	94.6	94.5
15	Switzerland	50.2	62.6	66.8	72.6	75	62.9

Source: Youth Voter Participation, Institute of Democratic and Electoral Assistance (IDEA)

indicates that relative lack of interest in politics among youth is not a phenomenon restricted to developing and democratising countries like Pakistan.

7. World Youth Report 2005

The World Youth Report 2005, put forth by the United Nations Economic and Social Council, stresses the need for the participation of youth in the decision-making of a country. The report deals with the world social development and lays emphasis on the social development of youth in particular. The report highlights some ways to pull the youth into the realm of decision-making. Some of its aspects are as under:-

- Effective youth participation requires changes in how societies perceive young people. These changes need to be reflected in appropriate funding, in training to facilitate intergenerational

collaboration and in organizational structures that welcome new voices.

- National, regional and local youth council and forums are outlets for political and civic participation of youth. Youth councils and forums are the traditional channels for cooperation and exchange of information with the national government and other decision makers.
- Government and international organisations should seek to work with a broad range of the youth population, both those organised through formal youth organizations and those who are not.

The report thus stresses new modes of participation to provide opportunities for more young people to become active in decision making and in shaping their societies.

8. Draft National Youth Policy-2005 and Youth Involvement in Politics

The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth Affairs has drafted a "Pakistan Youth Policy- 2005" with the rationale that there is a need to articulate national understanding, thinking and planning on Pakistan's diverse and immensely talented young women and men. To foment this desire to bring the youth into the mainstream of events concerning national development, democratisation, social harmony and progress, the youth ministry has first identified the problems and challenges being faced by our youth today. Among other aspects that require immediate redemption, the youth ministry has shown concern over the lack of political awareness of our youth. As stated in the draft, "Young people (18 - 24) in Pakistan have the lowest electoral turn out in the country and this is clearly of concern in terms of **political** enfranchisement and **participation**. There are few opportunities for young people to engage in politically constructive way either in the national politics or at local level, neither can they create democratic organisations for themselves. There is no political education to enable young people to see politics in a wider context as reformative civic engagement".

To this end, the Ministry has laid down an objective for "**Encouraging in young people active, good citizenship by instilling *Pakistaniat*, promoting democratic engagement and broadening perspectives through political education, interaction, exchange, mobility and communication**". The Ministry envisions the youth to work with concerned agencies to develop a breadth of political education around rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

In this regard, a few projects have been proposed by the Ministry to underscore the importance of the political awareness among our youth. Youth Action Plan (YAP), is an intrinsic part of the Pakistan Youth Policy, that is designed to help the Ministry of Youth Affairs in realising the aims and objectives of the Policy and translate them into viable action.

Some of the guidelines, relevant to the subject of this paper, contained in the Draft Youth Policy include formation of

"**Student Societies**" which are envisaged to be "set up in the educational institutions in partnership with Ministry of Education (and Education Departments), with clear student-interest in view & ensuring that these are not politicised." The draft policy also proposes to institute a "**Pak-Youth Leadership Program** to promote positive political interest and motivation in young people leading to deeper democracy, strengthening of the political leadership base of political parties and that of the organized civic activism to nurture and produce 'socially aware, politically active' agents of change in Pakistani society".¹³

9. Current Avenues of Youth Participation in Politics

There is a strong need to explore how to increase and diversify avenues for youth participation to discuss national issues, engage with national leaders, and participate in discussions on what is important for Pakistan.

There are many young aspirants out there who see themselves as future leaders of this country and are motivated enough to get involved in politics at a very young age. Let us first define what politics really is and what it entails. *Politics is the art or science of government or governing, especially the governing of a political entity, such as a nation, and the administration and control of its internal and external affairs.*¹⁴ This art or science needs to be acquired, sometimes through proper grooming and education but mostly through years of experience, sweating and toiling within the corridors of assemblies trying to make some sense of the political system in the country.

So what really are the avenues open for young aspirants who want to take up politics seriously as a career? With student unions being discouraged by the government because of their strong proclivity towards getting politicised, it seems that a strong platform for the grooming of potential future leadership has been lost. Thus the initial stepping stones for the aspiring candidates where by they get their first peep into the vast political arena have to be any of the following after they have completed their

13. Draft Youth Policy, 2005

14. American Heritage Dictionary



House No. 7, 9th Avenue, F-8/1, Islamabad, Pakistan
Tel: (+92-51) 111-123-345; Fax: (+92-51) 226-3078
E-mail: info@pildat.org URL: www.pildat.org