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# Patronage, Populism, and Protest: Student Politics in Pakistani Punjab

Hassan Javid

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- 1 On October 5, 2015, a small group of activists belonging to the left-wing Democratic Students Alliance (DSA) gathered at the Liberty Market roundabout in Lahore to stage a protest demanding an end to Pakistan's ban on student unions. The ban, reintroduced in 1993 by the Supreme Court, but originally imposed in 1984 by the dictatorial government of General Zia-ul-Haq, made it illegal for student organizations to be involved in, or connected to, mainstream electoral politics.<sup>1</sup> Just over two years after the DSA's protest, clashes erupted in Punjab University between members of the Islami Jamiat-i-Talaba (IJT), a right-wing Islamist student organization historically linked to the Jamaat-i-Islami, and those of the Pashtun Students Union (PSU). The fighting on January 21 2018, which involved dozens of students and left a good percentage of them injured, was a repeat of an incident in March 2017 when similar clashes left 16 students wounded. In news reports covering both incidents, the animosity between the IJT and the PSU was attributed to conflicts over influence and turf, with the latter allegedly striking back against the well-entrenched position of the former at Punjab University.
- 2 While the DSA, IJT, and PSU are all products of very different political circumstances and alignments, what is interesting about the events listed above is the fact that these organizations exist in the first place. Despite the ban, with its emphasis on ending the involvement of university students in politics, student groups have continued to exist and engage with each other, as well as with political parties. Moreover, while many of the student organizations at the forefront of student activism in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s have gradually faded away into obscurity and irrelevance,<sup>2</sup> they have been replaced by new formations such as: the Insaf Students Federation (ISF), affiliated with the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI); and the Pakistan Muslim League, Nawaz's Youth Wing (henceforth referred to as PYW). Both organizations explicitly seek to bring students and other young people into the fold of formal political parties.
- 3 The existence and emergence of groups like the DSA, ISF, and PYW raises interesting questions about the contemporary state of politics in Pakistan, and also problematizes

a widespread view of youth politics that suggests that the bans on student unions imposed in 1984 and 1993 has either facilitated the dominance of Islamist outfits like the IJT (Nasr 1993; Nelson 2011) or has shaped a generation of students characterized by political apathy and disinterest (Rehman and Naqvi 2013; Lall 2014). In addition to explaining the genesis of these three student/youth organizations, this paper seeks to examine the precise ways in which these groups engage with politics in the formally democratic dispensation that has existed in Pakistan since 2008 while arguing that student politics in Punjab currently follows three different, but not mutually exclusive, templates. Seen through this lens, the PYW epitomizes a model of patronage politics geared towards augmenting young voter support through schemes and programs; the ISF, to acquire electoral power, mobilizes around populist appeals geared towards attracting adherents away from mainstream parties; and the DSA utilizes radical ideological appeals to generate support to protest the political and economic status quo. The paper traces how these three distinct organizational and activist strategies emerge from the interplay between the structural imperatives and individual orientations defining student bodies within the framework of Pakistani politics. It also examines the implications of student groups' capacities for producing or reinforcing particular patterns of political engagement. In particular, the paper suggests that the mechanisms through which groups like the PYW and ISF have emerged reinforces the depoliticization of Pakistan's students, fostering a form of student politics that, paradoxically, functions without students. In shifting the focus away from the experiences of students themselves, and towards the institutional mechanisms through which they have been co-opted by mainstream political actors, this paper draws attention to how student activism has been contoured by the broader context and political opportunity structure in Pakistan.

- 4 Throughout this paper, it is argued that the trajectory taken by mainstream student politics in recent decades is one characterized by systematic "depoliticization." What this means is that in addition to being limited in terms of the types of organizations they can participate in, students in Pakistan have increasingly been subjected to restrictions on the types of politics they can engage in and the range of issues around which they can mobilize. Thus, for example, while students can form student societies related to extracurricular activities, and sometimes use these for political discussions and debate (a tactic used effectively by the DSA), they are not allowed to form student "unions" and are often barred from hosting and even participating in events with an overtly political focus. Indeed, as is clear from some instances described below, students and even faculty attempting to do so have been subject to censorship and even harassment by the state. At the same time, particularly since the 1980s, official patronage extended to Islamist student organizations amidst a broader ban on student politics, coupled with a narrative suggesting student politics is inherently violent and dangerous, has meant that the space for mobilizing students has shrunk in ideological and organizational terms. An entire generation of students has come of age without exposure to the kind of politics that defined the student experience from the 1950s to the 1970s. Indeed, when contemporary student politics in Pakistan is referred to as "depoliticized," it is in contrast with an earlier, more radical tradition of political engagement. As this paper argues, it is the erosion of this tradition that has created the space for the kind of top-down, centralized, and non-ideological forms of student politics adopted by the mainstream parties.

- 5 The paper's focus on Punjab is rooted in how the province has borne witness to some of the country's most competitive electoral contests in recent years (particularly between the PML-N and the PTI), which have spilled over into the realm of student politics. Punjab has also been the main region within which the DSA has operated since its inception. However, the templates for student politics described in this paper arguably have broader applicability in Pakistan; the "youth"/student wings of the PTI and PML-N follow similar models of organization across the country and, as argued by this paper, have emerged out of broader processes shaping the form and nature of student politics in the country since the 1980s. Similarly, even the Pakistan People's Party, aligned with the once-powerful People's Student Federation, has been subject to the same pressures and constraints as its political rivals with comparable effects on student politics in Sindh. As discussed below, however, there are some exceptions to this general tendency towards depoliticization and cooptation; in addition to the DSA, student organizations built around ethnic identity (in, for example, Balochistan) and Islam are arguably oriented around more explicitly ideological and political axes than their mainstream. However, they remain relatively limited in their size and reach (with the IJT being an exception to the rule) and are themselves products of broader political circumstances informed by Pakistan's history of ethnic and religious tensions. While these organizations are not analyzed in any detail in this paper, their dynamics, particularly in an ostensibly "democratic" Pakistan, could be a fruitful subject for future research.
- 6 The paper begins with a brief overview of the literature on, and history of, student politics in Pakistan, emphasizing how the focus has tended to be on the ideological clash between left and right-wing organizations, as well as associated ethnic groups, during periods of authoritarian rule, with comparatively less attention being paid to student politics within the framework of Pakistan's democratic governance. This is followed by accounts of each of the three student organizations covered in this paper—the PYW, the ISF, and the DSA—illustrating the differences between them as well as the varying roles they play as vehicles for the recruitment and mobilization of voters, the articulation of issues and grievances, and networks for the acquisition and dispensation of patronage. The paper then concludes with some reflections on the future of student politics in Pakistan, particularly considering the creeping authoritarianism that has arguably characterized the country's politics in recent years.

## A Brief History of Student Politics in Pakistan

- 7 The earliest accounts of student participation in Pakistan's politics generally tend to focus on the role played by the Muslim Students Federation in the years leading up to partition and independence in 1947. Formed in 1937 as a part of the All India Muslim League, the MSF played a key role in the League's attempts to generate and mobilize support for the idea of Pakistan in the cities of Punjab (Mirza 1991). However, soon after independence, the MSF's position as the primary organization representing student interests in Pakistan was challenged by the emergence of rival groups on both the left and the right; the IJT was formed in 1947 as an affiliate of the Jamaat-i-Islami, the Democratic Students Federation (DSF) was created to be the student wing of the Communist Party of Pakistan in 1950, and the National Student Federation emerged as a left-wing union backed by the National Awami Party and other leftist forces. In

addition to these groups, student organizations based in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) also emerged including the East Pakistan Students' League (affiliated with the Awami League), the East Pakistan Students Union (linked to the East Pakistan wing of the National Awami Party), and the Islami Chattra Sangha (part of the East Pakistan Jamaat-i-Islami). Finally, the first two decades after independence also saw the emergence of explicitly ethnic student organizations such as the Pakhtoon Students Federation and the Baloch Students Organization. According to at least one contemporary account, 85 percent of student respondents in East Pakistan and 68 percent in West Pakistan were members of at least one of the organizations listed above (Maniruzzaman 1971a).

- 8 The multiplication of student organizations in the immediate aftermath of partition was arguably a direct result of the fragmentation of Pakistan's broader political landscape after independence. As has been documented at length by Toor (2011), Malik (2013b), Raza (2013), and Ali (2013), the first decade of Pakistan's history was characterized in no small part by attempts by left-wing political forces to assert greater influence in the politics of the country, an effort that was ultimately met with considerable opposition from the state leading to, but not ending with, the banning of the Communist Party of Pakistan in 1954. Early on, the imperatives of Cold War politics led the Pakistani establishment to align itself quite firmly with the anti-Communist bloc headed by the United States (Jalal 1989), creating a cleavage between anti-communist elites in the state and left-wing challengers in society that spilled over into student politics. This left-right divide was also supplemented by political differences over the role of religion in Pakistan's politics and public discourse, with explicitly religious groups like the IJT coming into conflict with their secular opponents, generating antagonisms that would continue to shape student politics in the decades to come.
- 9 In addition to the Left-Right cleavage that pit some student unions against the state, Pakistan's fractious ethnic politics also fed into the broader politicization of the country's students. East Pakistani university students who were at the forefront of calls for greater ethnic and provincial recognition and autonomy, as evinced by the clashes that erupted in 1952 at Dhaka University over the non-adoption of Bengali as a national language in Pakistan, were the forerunners of ethnicity-based student mobilizations in West Pakistan that sought to challenge the hegemony exerted by Punjab over the country's politics (Samad 1998; Hussain 2012). The Pakhtoon and Baloch student organizations that emerged in this period were linked to the nascent ethno-national movements that had begun to emerge in the provinces of Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa and Balochistan and were joined by groups like the Jeay Sindh Students Federation in Sindh. Like contemporary left-wing student groups, with which they shared some ideological affinities, these student organizations also found themselves at the receiving end of state repression aimed at preserving the political status quo.
- 10 Student politics in Pakistan's early years was thus characterized by ideological and ethnic cleavages that set groups against each other and, in some instances, against the state. Matters came to a head during the military government of General Ayub Khan, when Pakistan's disparate student organizations came together to participate in the movement that would eventually topple the regime in 1969. Despite systematic attempts by the regime and its predecessors to suppress left-wing political forces in Pakistan, the continued existence of such groups in both the Eastern and Western parts

of Pakistan, buttressed by informal networks of cooperation and collaboration, meant that workers and students were able to marshal the resources required to effectively oppose the Ayub Khan government in the late 1960s (Malik 2013a). More specifically, left-wing and ethnic student groups antagonized by the repressive measures taken by the regime, including attempts to ban student politics when Ayub Khan first came to power, were joined in opposition to the regime by organizations that might have otherwise been expected to support it, with the MSF and IJT both throwing their weight behind the anti-Ayub movement (Ali 1970; Maniruzzaman 1971b; Sayeed 1979).<sup>3</sup>

- 11 The collapse of the Ayub regime was quickly followed by the secession of East Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh, an event that severed the ties that had existed between the student organizations of both countries. In West Pakistan, the elections of 1970 had brought the Pakistan People's Party to power with its charismatic leader, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, riding the wave of popular discontent against Ayub Khan to garner electoral support on an avowedly left-wing platform that built on the achievements of the various worker and student groups that had been instrumental to the success of the anti-Ayub movement (Jones 2003). Soon after coming to power, however, the new PPP government essentially turned its back on many of its erstwhile allies and supporters, engaging in a crackdown on left-wing workers and students' groups that opposed it over its alleged lack of commitment to radical reform (Ali 2005; Malik 2018). The PPP government's opposition to these groups was shaped by its broader political struggles, particularly against the National Awami Party and its affiliated organizations, as well as the Jamaat-i-Islami and factions of the Muslim League. The repression of alternative left-wing forces by the PPP government allowed it to claim the mantle of the Left in Pakistan even as the party itself drifted increasingly to the right (Akhtar 2010), and its own student organization, the Peoples' Student Federation, emerged as a competitor for the political space occupied by rival left-wing unions (Paracha 2009).
- 12 The toppling of the first PPP government by a military coup launched by General Zia-ul-Haq in 1977 once again altered the topography of student politics in Pakistan. Zia's regime enjoyed the support of the right-wing parties and student organizations that had underpinned the Pakistan National Alliance (PNA) which had come together to oppose the PPP in the 1970s and was aligned firmly with the IJT and the MSF. In addition to this, 1978 also saw the birth of the All Pakistan Mohajir Students Organization (APMSO), an entity that explicitly sought to represent Urdu-speaking migrants living in Sindh's major cities, and which would later give birth to the MQM. While the APMSO was, at least initially, suspected of being an organization propped up by the Zia regime to counter the influence of the PPP in Sindh, by 1981 the vagaries of local government and campus politics led the APMSO to join the United Students' Movement, a collection of left-wing and ethnic student organizations opposed to the Islamizing and authoritarian tendencies of the Zia regime and its allies.
- 13 In subsequent years, the enduring power of the existing student groups was demonstrated when anti-Zia groups like the PSF swept student union elections held in universities in the late 1970s and early 1980s. At the same time, increasing repression by the Zia regime and the violent on-campus activities of the IJT led to an increase in the frequency of armed clashes between rival student groups, a situation made worse by the influx of weapons from the war raging in Afghanistan which, when in the hands of student unions, resulted in unprecedented levels of death and injury. It was the combination of these two factors—the enduring appeal of anti-regime student

groups and the weaponization of student politics—that arguably provided the pretext for the ban on student politics imposed by General Zia-ul-Haq in 1984 (Butt 2009; Paracha 2009). While the IJT was largely able to evade the effects of this ban, mainly due to the continued cooperation between the Jamaat-i-Islami and the Zia regime, other student groups were increasingly forced underground; while they still existed on campuses across the country, elections that they held were deemed void, their activities were closely regulated and suppressed, and the rambunctious democratic politics that had characterized student organizations in the 1960s and the 1970s was brought to an end.

- 14 When the government of Zia-ul-Haq finally collapsed in 1988, once more bringing the PPP to power, the ban that had been imposed on student politics was lifted. Subsequent union elections across Pakistan saw the IJT defeated by the PSF, the MSF, and other progressive groups, setting the stage for the revival of the kind of student politics that had characterized the pre-Zia years. However, in addition to generating clashes between groups like the PSF and APMSO which sought to fill the vacuum left by the IJT, the dismissal of the PPP government in 1990 and its replacement by one headed by the Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (IJI), a collection of conservative and religious parties set up during the Zia years and opposed to the PPP, saw the re-emergence of the campus clashes that had provided the pretext for banning student unions in 1984. Once again, the enduring popularity of the PSF and its allied groups, coupled with a split in the IJI that led to the IJT vying with the MSF for control in Punjab's campuses, led to violent clashes that prompted the government of Nawaz Sharif to approach the Supreme Court in 1991 to uphold the ban on unions that had been imposed by General Zia-ul-Haq. The Supreme Court did so in early 1993 just months before Nawaz Sharif's government was itself dismissed by President Ghulam Ishaq Khan (Paracha 2009). For the rest of the 1990s, student politics remained largely informal; while the IJT was able to reassert itself on campuses throughout the country in a way not dissimilar to how it operated during the years of the Zia regime's ban on student politics, groups like the MSF and the PSF also continued to operate, albeit with dwindling influence and support.
- 15 By the time Pakistan experienced its third military coup in 1999, bringing General Pervez Musharraf to power, the student politics of past decades had mostly come to an end. While the PSF and MSF existed on paper (with the latter now aligning itself with the PML-Q, a breakaway faction of the PML-N allied with the new regime), these organizations no longer had the presence on campus or the resources needed to continue operating as viable political entities. Progressive groups like the NSF disappeared from the radar altogether whereas ethnic organizations like the BSO continued to operate in their relatively small provincial enclaves, often at the receiving end of broader state repression aimed at suppressing ethno-national sentiment. The IJT maintained a presence in universities and colleges, particularly in Punjab, but increasingly directed its energies towards regulating students on campus rather than engaging in mainstream politics. For Paracha (2009) and Nelson (2011), this apathy could be explained by two significant factors. First, the birth of the Musharraf regime coincided with the coming-of-age of an entire generation of students that had grown up under the shadow of the ban on student politics imposed by General Zia-ul-Haq, the effect of which was multiplied by the not entirely unwarranted belief that student politics in the 1980s and 1990s had been reduced to little more than violent clashes between unsavory elements acting as extensions of national level political parties. Second, the moribund nature of student politics created space for alternative

organizations, such as more radical national and transnational Islamist outfits tolerated and even nurtured by the state, to attract students interested in engaging in politics

- 16 It was therefore surprising when the anti-Musharraf movement of 2007, triggered by a judicial crisis that erupted after Musharraf's arbitrary and unlawful dismissal of the country's Chief Justice, saw the participation, albeit in limited numbers, of students affiliated with elite, private universities like the Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS), Beaconhouse National University (BNU), and the National University of Computer and Engineering Sciences (commonly known as FAST). As argued by Bolognani (2011), Talib (2011) and Kalra (2018), the participation of students from these universities, and LUMS in particular, was prompted by a combination of factors; in addition to possessing relatively high levels of privilege, derived from their socioeconomic status which insulated them from some of the dangers involved in taking on the state, they also benefitted from the presence of faculty and individual students ideologically committed to opposing authoritarian rule. Furthermore, the changing media landscape in Pakistan and, indeed, the world, facilitated their protest activities; not only could they access information about the anti-Musharraf campaign from an increasingly globalized media, these students were also able to use the internet and nascent forms of social media to organize, disseminate information, and garner support for their cause (Bolognani 2010; Talib 2011; Zia 2012). At the same time, following a confrontation with IJT activists during a visit to Punjab University to rally support for the anti-Musharraf movement, Imran Khan, the leader of the PTI, established the Insaf Students Federation (ISF) on November 14, 2007 as a means through which to mobilize students against the regime, but also in support of the PTI and its quest for political power.
- 17 When the PPP returned to government in 2008 following elections held after the fall of the Musharraf regime, Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gillani promised to end the decades-long ban on student unions that had crippled student politics in Pakistan. However, no action was taken in this regard by the PPP or the PML-N government that succeeded it in 2013. While the Senate of Pakistan did pass a resolution calling for student unions to be revived in 2017, the ban on student politics remains in place. Yet, despite this, groups like the ISF and IJT continue to operate on campuses, even as older student organizations like the PSF and the MSF have struggled to emerge from obscurity.

## Democracy, Electoral Politics, and Student Organizations in Pakistan

- 18 Matthew Nelson (2011) suggests that the tendency to view student politics in Pakistan in terms of national, territorially defined ideological, sectarian, and ethnic cleavages obscures how, since the 1990s, the decline of traditional student unions has led many young people to join and support transnational organizations, primarily Islamist in nature, that offer a political vision transcending the largely static politics of local organizations. While this highlights an important dimension of contemporary student engagement with politics in Pakistan, little has been said about how the country's transition to democracy in 2008 has affected student organizations. Indeed, as argued by Javid (2019), Pakistan's decade of democracy has borne witness to attempts by the mainstream parties in power at the Federal and Provincial levels, most notably the

PML-N in Punjab, to consolidate their position through legislative and executive interventions aimed at strengthening their ability to control electoral candidates, politicians, local vote blocs, and bureaucrats, through the provision of patronage. These efforts have revolved around altering the rules of political competition by ensuring ruling parties monopolize the levers of state patronage and bureaucratic appointment, thereby skewing the electoral landscape in their favor and making it harder for political rivals to offer credible alternatives to the political status quo.<sup>4</sup> In this context, it stands to reason that the student and youth organizations affiliated with these parties, and operating across the country despite the continuing ban on student “politics,” feed into these attempts to alter the broader political landscape.<sup>5</sup>

- 19 Concurrently, to the extent that current student bodies affiliated with mainstream parties represent little more than extensions of their parent organizations in ideological and electoral terms, thereby narrowing their scope for engagement with the larger political questions that characterize contemporary Pakistan, it is important to ask how students organizing outside of these constraints operate in an environment where formal “political” activity remains banned, popular participation in student organizations remains limited, and official state policy continues to form the basis for crackdowns and repression directed at forces seeking to campaign on issues related to social and economic justice, minority rights, and provincial autonomy. This is particularly true for left-wing groups attempting to recover from decades of opposition from the state, and the decimation of traditional left-wing organizations like the NSF and DSF that have all but disappeared from mainstream politics. As the following case studies show, focusing on the PLW, the ISF, and the DSA, the imperatives of electoral competition, the appeal of populist mobilization, and the impetus for radical change, all converge to produce different trajectories of political participation by students in a democratizing Pakistan.

## The PML-N Youth Wing: Patronage in Place of Politics

- 20 When General Musharraf removed Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif from power in 1999 and subsequently exiled him and other top leaders of the PML-N to Saudi Arabia, the effect on the party was immediate and devastating; within months, politicians from the PML-N voiced their support for the new military regime. This culminated in the formation of the PML-Q, a pro-Musharraf political party; described by one commentator as “less an organized political force than a collection of opportunists” (Shah 2003:35), it would go on to win the general elections of 2002. The MSF, which had remained aligned with the PML-N throughout the 1990s and had attempted to maintain a presence on college campuses despite the ban on student unions, also switched its allegiance, formally linking itself to the new party in power. While this new partnership might have represented a significant political realignment in the heady days of the 1960s or the 1970s, the stagnant student politics of the Musharraf era meant that the MSF remained a marginal force, sinking further into irrelevancy.
- 21 Nawaz Sharif’s return to Pakistan after the end of the Musharraf government, and his party’s subsequent rise to power in Punjab in 2008 (and, later, its victory in the 2013 general elections) saw the MSF return to the PML-N’s political fold. While this shift prompted at least one exchange of hostilities between different factions of the MSF in Lahore’s M.A.O College on April 28 2008, matters were quickly settled as the

organization settled into a now familiar routine; office bearers were elected, regional chapters were created, and the MSF could be relied upon to provide the PML-N with a small supply of students and other young people to attend rallies and vote as and when required. Again, the absence of any active student politics on university campuses, in terms of elections or campaigns, and the more generalized disenchantment characterizing student politics, meant that the MSF, as an organization built around student engagement, could only play an extremely limited role in the wider politics of the PML-N. Indeed, the frustrations felt by the MSF were perhaps best articulated by its Chief Organizer Sardar Mohsin Abbasi in December 2017 when he lashed out against the party leadership for not granting the MSF any representation whatsoever in the PML-N's decision-making bodies.

- 22 However, soon after coming to power, the PML-N began to pursue an alternative strategy for engaging with young people and students, eschewing the use of the MSF and similar organizations in favor of a more centralized approach, directed by the party leadership, aimed at directly cultivating the support of these groups through the provision of patronage and the articulation of policies aimed at capturing the attention and, more importantly, votes of this constituency. In 2011, Capt. Muhammad Safdar Awan, Nawaz Sharif's son-in-law, was appointed the head of the PML-N Youth Wing and was tasked with organizing and mobilizing the party's young supporters, performing a task that, in previous years, would have been performed by the MSF. Yet, unlike the MSF, the PYW did not attempt to establish itself in universities and on campuses. Instead, it became a platform through which the party articulated policies aimed at highlighting the PML-N's commitment to improving the lives of Pakistan's "youth"—a putatively undifferentiated mass of young people—as well as directly recruiting members through meetings, rallies, and social media.
- 23 In choosing to attract younger voters through the PYW and its patronage-oriented approach to cultivating support, the PML-N was arguably replicating the same model of centralized patronage disbursement it employed to cement its control over the bureaucracy and local government in Punjab (Javid 2019). However, the decision not to revive the MSF on campuses was also borne out of the PML-N's experiences during the early 1990s and later during the Musharraf years; clashes between rival factions of the MSF and other student organizations had, after all, prompted Nawaz Sharif to approach the Supreme Court to reintroduce the Zia-era ban in student politics in 1993. Similarly, the MSF's defection to the PML-Q during the Musharraf regime served as a reminder that the PML-N's party apparatus could be subverted and used against it by rivals in adverse political circumstances. These factors, coupled with the MSF's organizational decline, prompted the PML-N to pursue an alternative model of student and youth engagement that promised to cultivate support without having to cede any organizational control or autonomy.
- 24 The main thrust of the PML-N's attempts to attract young people revolved around the initiation of various schemes that aimed to deliver patronage to potential voters, offering them goods and services in exchange for political support. For example, one of the flagship schemes launched by the PML-N towards this end was a program, launched in 2012, that was slated to provide over 100,000 free laptops to underprivileged students across Punjab at a cost of Rs. 4 billion, all of which came packaged in backpacks proclaiming their provenance as gifts from Shahbaz Sharif, the Chief Minister of the province. A related policy, launched by the Punjab government in 2012, saw Rs. 1.5

billion being allocated to provide internships to 50000 students in the province, some of whom were encouraged to take up positions in the Chief Minister's Secretariat. At the same time, the Punjab government also pledged Rs. 3 billion for the provision of loans to underprivileged students. The following year, after winning the general elections of 2013, the PML-N continued its tendency to concentrate power in the hands of the Sharif family and its closest political allies, with Nawaz Sharif's daughter Maryam Nawaz being appointed the head of the Prime Minister's Youth Program, directing a range of different schemes aimed at providing young people loans, skills training, and tuition waivers. These schemes and others continued for the duration of the PML-N's tenure and were constantly used by the party as a basis upon which to campaign for young voters.

- 25 At some level, as admitted in a 2011 interview by PML-N leader and minister Ahsan Iqbal, the PML-N's shift to this model of campaigning was based on a recognition of how, since 2007, the PML-N's relative indifference to students had allowed the PTI and the ISF, with their dynamic message of change and empowerment, to attract younger voters who might have otherwise been sympathetic to the PML-N. By 2018, on the eve of the general elections held that year, the PML-N's prime minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi claimed that 1.1 million people had been beneficiaries of the various youth-oriented programs launched by his party, representing billions of rupees worth of spending invested in cultivating youth support. While there is currently insufficient data to indicate the extent to which this model was able to generate youth enthusiasm for the PML-N at the ballot box, the party's entire approach to student politics over the past decade is one that runs entirely contrary to Pakistan's earlier experiences in this area. More importantly, it represents an alternate mode of political engagement, with a well-entrenched, dynastic, and clientelistic political party foregoing often messy and difficult engagement with campus politics in favor of using the levers of state power to cultivate potential voters in a broader political atmosphere characterized by apolitical apathy and ideological emptiness.

## The Insaf Students Federation: From Populism to Power

- 26 When Imran Khan first launched the ISF in November 2007, it was largely in response to the hostile reception he received at Punjab University when he visited its main campus in Lahore at the height of the anti-Musharraf protests. Then, the ISF was largely envisaged as a campus-based alternative to groups like the IJT which had managed to flourish in Punjab despite the formal ban on student politics. However, like the PTI itself, the ISF remained a marginal force in Pakistani politics for several years until enthusiasm and support for the party erupted in the wake of a successful rally in Lahore, held on October 30 2011, which was attended by an estimated 100000 people. That the PTI could stage such a large and successful rally in Lahore, considered the main stronghold of the PML-N, was taken as evidence of the party's potential as a major political player, and marked the beginning of a political movement that eventually saw the PTI win the general elections of 2018.
- 27 From the very beginning, but especially after the 2011 Lahore rally, Imran Khan and the PTI's appeal lay in their constant use of populist rhetoric, calling for radical change to a corrupt status quo characterized by poor governance and instability.<sup>6</sup> Vowing that

his party would wash over this system like a “tsunami,” Imran Khan relentlessly campaigned on an anti-corruption agenda that targeted the PPP, PML-N, and other mainstream parties, blaming them for Pakistan’s past and present travails. Over time, the PTI was able to attract heavyweight politicians who defected from rival parties. While older party workers and Imran Khan himself initially resisted the need to accommodate such candidates, the party’s underwhelming performance in 2013 (given the expectations it had created for itself) led to a reconfiguration of its strategy that saw it make judicious use of traditional constituency politicians to win power in 2018. While there have always been rumors, sometimes endorsed by leading politicians like Javed Hashmi who left the PML-N for the PTI only to leave it too in 2014, suggesting that the PTI benefitted from the support of a military establishment increasingly committed to removing the PML-N from power,<sup>7</sup> the enthusiasm generated by the PTI, particularly among young voters, was undeniable. Indeed, polling data from the 2013 elections showed that the PTI was able to capture almost 30% of the youth vote, an impressive performance given that the party was a relatively new entrant to electoral politics (Siddiqui 2014).

- 28 The PTI’s success with young voters and students could arguably be attributed to its commitment to directly engaging with them. From its very inception, the ISF actively sought to recruit members from all of Pakistan’s provinces, and the party was arguably the first in Pakistan to recognize the tremendous potential of social media, making effective use of Facebook and Twitter to promote debate and discussion amongst the students and other young people joining the PTI. The PTI’s efforts to capture the youth vote were perhaps encapsulated by the party’s stated policy prior to the 2013 elections, of fielding only fresh, new faces under the age of 40 for provincial assembly seats in all of Pakistan’s provinces. The party remained true to this promise and while many of the resulting nominees were members of existing political families, the efforts made by the PTI to actively promote the voices of students and young people within its internal power structure arguably generated a sense of ownership and participation that explained the appeal it had for these groups (Siddiqui 2014; Lall 2014).
- 29 The PTI’s combination of anti-corruption rhetoric, apparent commitment to radical change, and active engagement with the youth was supplemented by a constant, visible, and sometimes even festive form of political contestation through mass rallies, demonstrations, and sit-ins directed against the PPP and the PML-N. In early 2013, hot on the heels of successful rallies in all of Pakistan’s major cities in which tens of thousands of attendees, many of whom were young, listened to speeches by Imran Khan and danced to campaign songs written by famous pop artists, the PTI joined a sit-in in Islamabad launched by the Pakistan Awami Tehreek which sought to force the resignation of the PPP government that was then in power. While this sit-in failed to achieve its objectives, it set the template for a months-long effort in 2014 when the PTI, protesting alleged rigging in 2013, planted thousands of its members in the heart of Islamabad to demand an investigation in the election. Night after night, Imran Khan and other PTI leaders made thunderous speeches castigating their political opponents while promising to create a “*naya*” (new) Pakistan should they be elected to power. These sit-ins were enthusiastically attended by PTI members from across Pakistan, were subjected to non-stop coverage in the media, and provided fodder for endless debates and discussions amongst Pakistan’s predominantly young consumers of social media. This model of campaigning also worked to great effect in 2017, on the eve of the 2018 elections, when allegations of corruption led to the dismissal of Nawaz Sharif as

prime minister following a Supreme Court decision, relentlessly demanded by Imran Khan, which barred Sharif from holding public office.

- 30 However, while the past decade has shown the existence of considerable support and enthusiasm for the PTI amongst young voters, the party's contradictions have increasingly come to the fore. Indeed, prior to the 2013 elections, the PTI's reliance on rallies and rhetoric to mobilize support arguably came at the expense of an investment in the party's organizational apparatus. This was demonstrated by the failure of the *Tabdeeli Razakar* (Agents of Change) program; initially conceived of as a platform through which younger voters supportive of the PTI could volunteer to campaign for the party's candidates in constituencies across the country, the plan ultimately foundered due to a lack of planning. According to one senior PTI leader who would later go on to hold a cabinet position after the party came to power in 2018, the party initially believed that the enthusiasm displayed for the PTI by younger voters would mean that hundreds if not thousands of volunteers would be willing to work for the party's election campaign in 2013. Yet, even though recruitment of *Tabdeeli Razakars* began in September 2012, the party's failure to effectively train them or incorporate them within the party's structure meant that this potential resource remained unutilized. The program itself died out after the 2013 elections.
- 31 More damaging than the party's lack of planning, however, has been the PTI's transformation into an entity emulating and ultimately reproducing status quo politics in Pakistan. As a party campaigning on a platform of change, it is paradoxical that it has had to rely on traditional patrons and brokers to consolidate vote blocs across Punjab and Pakistan; just as its legislative record in in Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa, where it won power in 2013, demonstrated a tendency towards centralization and the use of patronage to secure power that is not too dissimilar to the methods employed by the PML-N in Punjab. More significantly, as evinced by conflicts within the party between its so-called "ideological" wing comprised of old party workers and newer inductees belonging to the traditional political class, the relatively open and inclusive party structure that facilitated the participation of students and other fresh faces has slowly been replaced by a sclerotic party apparatus dominated by a few heavyweight politicians.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, many of the pledges made by the PTI in 2013, such as its commitment to fielding young, new candidates in elections, were conspicuous by their absence in 2018 and while the party's presence on social media remains impressive, it has gradually lost some ground to its increasingly web-savvy political opponents. Perhaps most importantly of all, in-fighting over internal party elections and the selection of electoral candidates has shown that the ISF, like the MSF, PSF, and IJT before it, has become little more than a mechanism through which aspirants to public office make use of connections with the established political elite to secure power. While there may have been considerable energy propelling the PTI to power, coming in no small part from the enthusiasm of young supporters, it remains to be seen if the logic of electoral politics will allow the PTI to contrast itself with its rivals in the years to come.

## The Democratic Students Alliance: Radicalism without Representation

- 32 The decline of student politics ushered in by the ban imposed by General Zia-ul-Haq was accompanied by the spread of more conservative, Islamist ideologies on campuses around the country. This was an effect of the continued presence of the IJT in universities, the dwindling influence of alternative, secular forces, and official state policy that encouraged the Islamization of life in Pakistan (Toor 2011). Indeed, one influential account of student attitudes and opinions in Pakistan, based on surveys conducted on university campuses in 2010, suggested that even relatively well-educated, middle class students were largely conservative and susceptible to radicalization by Islamist forces (Siddiqi 2010). While there are and were outliers to this general trend, such as the National College of Arts in Lahore which has long been known for possessing a relatively tolerant, diverse, and liberal campus environment, enclaves such as this have arguably only been able to survive due to concerted attempts by students, faculty, and administrators to actively prevent organizations like the IJT from developing a presence on campus. More importantly, for all its pluralism, the National College of Arts has hardly ever been a hotbed of student radicalism, its resident artists and musicians remaining largely disconnected from broader political struggles (Sankara 2010).
- 33 Nonetheless, despite this apparent decline in support for left-wing political ideologies amongst university students, one of the more interesting developments to emerge from the anti-Musharraf movement was the creation of small student groups, primarily organized on the campuses of elite universities like LUMS, that actively sought to nurture the tradition of progressive and democratic politics that re-emerged in that period. The activities of these disparate and often unconnected groups led to the creation of the Democratic Students Alliance in 2012, a loose collection of avowedly left-wing students that grew out of largely failed attempts to revive the NSF. With an explicit commitment to secularism, economic and social justice, and democratic politics, the DSA worked to expand its networks, with groups at LUMS and BNU, comprised of both students and faculty, reaching out to, and engaging with, potentially likeminded students in public sector universities like Lahore's Government College, the University of Engineering and Technology (UET), and Punjab University. In early 2018, the Progressive Students Collective (PSC) was created as a parallel organization affiliated with the DSA; while the latter continued with its focus on issues of broader political concern, the PSC was set up to focus on questions related to campus life and the welfare of university and college students.
- 34 What distinguishes the DSA and the PSC from other organizations like the ISF is a lack of political patrons. This is partly an effect of the wider malaise of the Left in Pakistan, whereby the number and influence of left-wing political parties remains limited. Thus, while the DSA has often worked in collaboration with parties like the Awami Workers Party (AWP), one of the larger leftist parties currently operating in Pakistan, its political work remains distinct and autonomous, wholly directed by students themselves working with mentors from their faculties.<sup>9</sup> While this has placed limitations on the ability of the DSA to engage in political work on the scale of its more well-resourced and politically connected rivals, freedom from the ideological and practical constraints imposed by the logic of electoral politics has allowed the DSA to

mobilize around issues that might otherwise be ignored by mainstream politics, also facilitating gradual growth of a grass-roots activism steeped in an ideological commitment to progressive causes.

- 35 Like its contemporaries, the DSA makes extensive use of social media to facilitate debate, discussion, and organization, but also supplements this with regular meetings, study circles, and events aimed at generating interest in the campaigns it works on. Over the course of the past half-decade, activists affiliated with the DSA have held protests against religious extremism on and off campus, have joined forces with the AWP to campaign for the rights of the residents of squatter settlements in Islamabad, have worked to ensure fair wages for janitorial staff on campuses, have rallied in support of the rights of women and religious minorities, and have also protested the abduction of journalists and other dissidents who routinely go missing in Pakistan. Often, the DSA's support for these causes runs entirely contrary to the narratives and agendas of the state and mainstream political parties, with the latter in particular choosing to avoid engaging with issues that could potentially be contentious and controversial.
- 36 Although the DSA represents an important voice in Pakistan's student politics, carrying the mantle of a progressive tradition that has all but disappeared from the country's campuses, its radical orientation and concurrent lack of engagement with electoral politics imposes inevitable limits on its power to act as a vehicle for change. While its entire model of student engagement rests on the careful and principled inculcation of progressive values amongst its adherents, with a view towards eventually generating or feeding into the mass movements of the future, it remains a relatively marginal and fragile force in contemporary Pakistani politics.<sup>10</sup>

## Reflections on the Future of Student Politics in Pakistan

- 37 One of the more striking observations that can be made about student politics in present-day Pakistan is the apparent absence of the kinds of ideological divides that pitted organizations like the NSF, the MSF, and the IJT against each other for much of Pakistan's history. While the IJT still exists as a force attempting to regulate social life on many of the country's campuses, and while ethnic student organizations like the BSO and the PkSF remain active and visible (in no small part due to the ongoing repression taking place in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa as the state cracks down on militancy and ethno-national sentiment), organizations like the PYW and the ISF are largely bereft of any ideological identity. As a mechanism for the distribution of patronage, the PYW is an essentially apolitical body divorced from any actual engagement with politics and while the ISF was borne out of populist appeals for change, it and its parent party defy ideological categorization, with their actual actions reflecting the emptiness of the rhetoric that guides them. The DSA is an important exception to this role, but its limited size and scale restricts the impact it has on the political landscape.
- 38 In this sense, it may be fair to suggest that student bodies like the PYW and ISF are simply artefacts of the space in which they exist; while surveys show that young people in Pakistan have relatively high levels of political awareness, they remain disinclined to actually participate in politics, particularly when it is of the contentious variety

(Lall 2014). This is what arguably creates the space in which ideologically barren organizations like the PYW and ISF can fill the void left by a previous generation of student unions. Matters are not, of course, helped by the continuing existence of a ban on student politics that has disembedded universities and colleges from their social context. Where students in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and even 1980s received a political education through the elections and campaigns fought by rival student groups, the generation that has now come of age lacks that kind of political training and is likely to remain disconnected from more substantive political engagement in the years ahead.

- 39 The hollowing out of student politics in this fashion has been accompanied by a paradoxical explosion of apparent political engagement on the internet and social media. While this is still a relatively new area of scholarly inquiry, preliminary research on the link between social media and political participation in Pakistan shows that younger people are more likely to be influenced by, and participate in, politics online (Javaid 2017). Yet, as even a cursory examination of the online mediascape would show, the internet and social media in Pakistan are characterized by the existence of increasingly partisan echo chambers in which rhetoric, disinformation, and superficial involvement take the place of actual political work. As argued by Jodi Dean (2009), contemporary “communicative capitalism” has resulted in forms of political engagement that fetishize opinion and contribution over debate, argument, and facts, with the simple act of participation being valued over the content and meaning of any contribution that an individual might make. This perhaps captures the nature of student politics on the internet in Pakistan, whereby the strikes, protests, and forms of direct action that characterized an older model of movements have come to be replaced by clicks, tweets, and likes that arguably have little impact on the real world. Perhaps the best illustration of this comes from how, every day, partisans of the PTI and PML-N take to Twitter to “trend” hashtags castigating each other, engaging in tens of thousands of online interactions that are notable for how little activity they seem to generate on campuses and in the streets of Pakistan.
- 40 Contemporary student politics in Pakistan also takes place in a context where the state has gradually but inexorably clamped down on dissent and alternative viewpoints. While Pakistan’s transition to democracy in 2008 opened the possibility of the emergence of a more democratic, participatory, and accountable politics, subsequent events have shown such hopes to be premature. In addition to allegedly abducting bloggers, journalists, and other critical voices, the state in Pakistan has also attacked campuses themselves; in 2015, for example, an event scheduled to be held at LUMS discussing missing people in Balochistan was cancelled following pressure applied to the university administration by the country’s security services, even as faculty associated with the event were vilified in the media. Similarly, faculty at the same university who were suspected of harboring sympathies for the Pashtoon Tahaffuz Movement, a Pashtun group protesting the brutality of the military during its anti-militancy campaigns in Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa, received phone calls and threatening messages from members of Pakistan’s intelligence services. In 2016 and 2017, one lecturer associated with the DSA was forced out of both Punjab University and Government College for his alleged anti-state activities, and was even picked up by intelligence operatives and held for several hours after a night-time raid on his residence in 2018. All these instances, and there are more, demonstrate a clear desire on the part of the state to silence dissenting voices on university campuses, and to stifle academic freedom in the name of national security. In conclusion, therefore, the

trajectory likely to be taken by Pakistan's student politics in the future is likely to see an entrenchment of the processes described above; the emergence of mainstream student organizations bereft of ideology and hamstrung by the logic of electoral competition coexisting with smaller, increasingly endangered bodies struggling to at least continue an older tradition of progressive politics.

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## NOTES

1. As discussed below, the ban on student politics in Pakistan was introduced by the Zia-ul-Haq regime to blunt the radical potential of student movements. Except for a brief period from 1988 to 1993, the ban on student politics has remained in place, with its chief effect being the elimination of formal student unions connected to political parties or engaged in other forms of political activity. The one exception to this has been the IJT, whose ideological affinity with the Zia regime led to it being excluded from the ban, and “underground” student organizations—often ethnic—that challenge the state. Additionally, while older student unions and organizations continued to exist on paper (briefly being resuscitated from 1988-1993), the limits imposed on their activities—such as bans on rallies, protests, and electoral campaigning on and off campus—have gradually led to their obsolescence.
2. Examples include the Democratic Students Federations (DSF), the Peoples Students Federation (PSF) and the Muslim Students Federation (MSF); all of which were aligned with political parties prior to the ban on student unions imposed in 1993, and all of which are now either defunct or marginal.
3. The MSF’s decision to support the anti-Ayub movement was prompted in part by extant splits within the Muslim League that came to a head in the 1965 elections in which Ayub and his Convention Muslim League competed against Fatima Jinnah’s Councilor Muslim League. The IJT, like the Jamaat-i-Islami, opposed the regime over its supposedly secular orientation.
4. An example of this can be seen in how local government laws passed in all four of Pakistan’s provinces between 2012 and 2014 now make it extremely difficult for local politicians elected from rival parties to receive development funding and facilitate service delivery without the consent of the party in power at the provincial level. In the context of Pakistan patron-client politics, this sends a signal to voters showing that votes for candidates belonging to parties not in power at the provincial level are essentially wasted, inducing voters to instead select politicians who will be more likely to deliver on promises of service delivery due to their alignment with the ruling party. See Javid (2019). A new, less exclusionary local government law was passed in Punjab by the new PTI government in 2019 but had not been implemented when this article was written.
5. The defeat of the PML-N in the 2018 general elections arguably demonstrates the limits to the ability of incumbent parties to tilt the electoral landscape in their favor.
6. The “populist” label attached to the PTI is derived from its approach to politics; emphasizing its status as a party working outside of traditional politics and appealing directly to masses disaffected by establishment “elites,” the PTI has styled itself as a party articulating popular discontent with the political status quo. This is perhaps best demonstrated by its emphasis on holding past rulers accountable and its pledges to radically transform Pakistan for the better—without necessarily providing concrete proposals for doing so. See Mulla (2017).
7. Allegations of this sort clouded the 2018 elections, when organizations like the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan and the European Union’s Election Observation Monitors concurred that the PML-N and other parties had suffered at the hands of pre-poll rigging engineered by the military establishment and designed to propel the PTI to power.
8. These insights into the factional conflict within the PTI, and the effect it has had on student politics, have been gleaned from interviews with PTI leaders and activists conducted by the author from 2014-2016.
9. The linkages between the DSA and AWP are arguably derived from how the organizations share some members. In particular, some of the DSA’s most prominent activists and members were or are part of the AWP.
10. Despite this, the PSC was able to successfully hold a large rally, called the Student Solidarity March, in Lahore on November 29 2019. The participants of this march were mostly drawn from

public sector universities and while the demands made during the event primarily focused on the revival of student unions and other campus-related issues, space was also given to articulating broader political concerns related to, for example, the grievances of Pakistan's ethnic minorities. The march was also notable for the explicitly left-wing rhetoric and slogans that were on display. While the long-term effects of the march remain to be seen, the state's reaction has been a mixture of accommodation and repressions, with promises to restore student unions being accompanied by the persecution and imprisonment of key faculty and student organizers.

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## ABSTRACTS

Despite the over three decades of repression in Pakistan under the regimes of General Zia-ul-Haq and General Musharraf Student, student politics began its revival with the emergence of student-led activist groups during the anti-Musharraf movement of 2007. While formal student "unions" remain banned in the country, student and "youth" collectives aligned with various political parties have started to play an increasingly visible and vocal role in everyday politics and mobilization. This paper seeks to contrast three of the main student organizations currently operating in Punjab, namely the PML-N Youth Wing (PYW), the PTI's Insaf Student Federation (ISF), and the left-wing Democratic Students Alliance (DSA). By focusing on the broader social and political context, characterized by state repression and systematic efforts to undermine student politics, in which these organizations operate, this paper argues that efforts by mainstream political parties to cultivate support amongst young people today reinforce patterns of political engagement and contestation that perpetuate the depoliticization of Pakistan's students and further entrench the country's framework of centralized patronage politics. This is particularly true for the PYW, whose approach works to incorporate students within the workings of its parent party, and the ISF, whose populist appeals have, over time, given way to a pragmatic politics bearing considerable resemblance to that of the PYW. The exception here is the DSA, an avowedly progressive and radical organization that remains committed to activism, but whose impact is limited by the constraints imposed by the wider political framework.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** student politics; democracy; Pakistan; patronage; populism; protests

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