

Can The Pakistani Youth Keep Themselves Away From The Toxic Political Milieu In The Country?

The Coronavirus Relief Tiger Force (CRTF), a youth-led initiative in Pakistan, has mobilized support and relief for the needy during the lockdown. However, the real challenge is how to keep the youth away from the toxic political environment in the country.

According to government officials, CRTF received an unprecedented response from the public. One report suggests that around 0.3 million people registered to become a part of the CRTF. Another report suggests that around half a million people joined the Force.

After the complete lockdown was lifted, this volunteer force was asked by Prime Minister Imran Khan to assist in the Ehsas Labour Registration Programme and help the digitally illiterate segment of society register in the scheme. Later, the government decided that the district administration and Deputy Commissioner's offices would engage the Tiger Force in monitoring the implementation of Coronavirus SOPs in public spheres.

For the first time in Pakistan, its enthusiastic youth has been given a platform to serve the nation. Channelizing their energies towards the right path would not only enhance their sense of ownership and obligations towards Pakistan but would also give them vast exposure. However, this optimism is not the end of the story

Unfortunately, it seems that we may be heading towards the politicization of Pakistani youth. Today, the political theater in Pakistan is in dire straits with the ruling party and opposition at loggerheads with each other. Both have opted to lock horns using the country's young population as their cannon fodder.

To challenge the CRTF, the Pakistan Muslim League (N) recently announced creating its Sher Jawan Force – a student movement to create political awareness among the Pakistani youth. This makes one wonder: in all the tenures when this party was in power, did it ever desire to engage with youth to this extent?

In a previous article, this author argued that Pakistan's experience with student movements/ unions has come at a huge cost. Thus, there are high chances that these two groups may turn out to be 'two rivals' creating an environment of 'us vs them', and their street fights may end up on our social media feeds or news channels during political campaigns and elections.

If history is any guide, instead of empowering the youth, such forces are created to gain political loyalties. These youngsters may also be utilized to mobilize masses and sometimes 'employed' to generate chaos in society – when required.

Over the years, the precarious internal security situation has led to rivalry between the People's Students Federation (PSF), Muslim Students Federation (MSF), All Pakistan Muttahida Students Organization (APMSO), and Islami Jamiat-i-Tulaba (IJT). Involvement in healthy democratic activities remained rare in such cases.

In fact, they performed as pressure groups before they were banned by the Supreme Court due to the rise of on-campus violence. The political backing of such organizations only serves the political agendas of relevant parties.

The federal government has urged the provincial administrations to expand the Tiger Force and mobilize it at district, tehsil, and union council level to serve society.

Nevertheless, the real question is: what is the objective of creating these youth forces?

If the answer is social engagement and welfare, would the Sher Jawan Force be treated the same way or would they face discrimination?

It is estimated that by 2020-21, around 6.65 million people would be unemployed in Pakistan, which would be an increase of 0.85 percent if compared to the outgoing FY. Pakistan is faced with the dilemma of massive unemployed-educated masses. Amongst the unemployed, the ratio of jobless graduates is three times higher.

In a society like ours – a degree and joblessness cannot go hand-in-hand as it brings disgrace to the family, adding to the frustration and mental health issues. Thus, initiatives that include social engagement are ideal to instill a sense of achievement in young people.

Also, data suggest that youth from Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the Federal Capital, Baluchistan, Gilgit-Baltistan, and Azad Kashmir (Pakistan-administered Kashmir) are passionate to carry out social work and serve the nation.

Would they be utilized in an ‘apolitical’ manner? Uncertainty and ambiguity abound.

Critical analysis of every situation enables creative thinking, but nurturing political agenda-driven youth movements would only cease such thinking and analysis.

Besides, it would also aid in manufacturing extreme mindsets, where one’s affiliation to a particular party would mean opposing even the positive work of the opponent. Considering the abovementioned argument, the creation of such forces would only further divide the youth of Pakistan.

In an overly politicized culture like ours, youth must realize that choosing one party would automatically instill hatred for the other. If inclined towards party A, their first task would be to malign Party B.

In an ideal scenario, young people should be empowered to take a common stance and voice their concerns towards all parties without bias or prejudice. It might not be beneficial for a particular political party, but this would be in the greater interest of Pakistan.

The youth of a country is the ultimate agent of social change. They must stand for justice, equality, education for all, and a healthy environment. A sense of responsibility must be inculcated in every Pakistani youngster. They must highlight and spread awareness on issues that mainstream media fails to cover, but at the same time, they cannot take the law into their own hands and start abusing the trust being put in them.

There needs to be unanimous consensus, amongst the political parties, that there would be no politicization of Pakistani youth. This means that these volunteer groups should not be labeled as “PTI” tigers or “PML (N)” sher jawans, rather promoted as an apolitical association of volunteers that inclusively supports national causes without being a gimmick or tool of the ruling or opposition party.

Ghanwa Ejaz is a researcher at the Centre for Aerospace & Security Studies (CASS), Rawalpindi, Pakistan. The article was first published in The Eurasian Times. She can be reached at cass.thinkers@gmail.com