

Original Research

The Analysis of Ban on Students' Political Unions in Educational Institutions: A Qualitative Study in University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan

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Abstract: *Pakistan's student political unions have operated in a paradoxical environment since 1984, when the military government of General Zia-ul-Haq imposed a ban on formally constituted student unions, while party-affiliated student political wings continued to function unchecked on university campuses. This qualitative study investigates the consequences of that ban at the University of the Punjab, Quaid-e-Azam Campus, Lahore, one of Pakistan's largest and most historically significant public universities. Guided by an interpretivist epistemological framework and reported in accordance with the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ), the study employed semi-structured open-ended interviews with political participants and focus group discussions with generic students. A purposive and snowball sampling strategy yielded a final sample of 30 participants: 15 generic students and 15 members or leaders drawn from five active student political unions on campus. Data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis, generating seven themes: opinions about student unions; the role of student unions; impact on individual students; impact on the campus environment; advantages and disadvantages of membership; motivations for joining; and views on the ban. Findings reveal that the ban has not depoliticized campus life but has instead displaced political activity into unaccountable, party-affiliated sectarian and ethnic unions. These operate without democratic oversight, contributing to factional conflict, moral policing, physical intimidation, and academic disruption, most acutely attributed to sectarian unions. Generic students widely perceived student political unions as failing their representational mandate, yet simultaneously recognized the necessity of formal collective advocacy structures. Political participants linked the persistence of campus violence directly to the absence of legalized, democratically elected union structures. The study concludes that restoring formally constituted, institutionally regulated student unions, rather than maintaining the ban, offers a more effective pathway toward reducing campus conflict and cultivating democratic civic culture among Pakistan's youth.*

Keywords: student political unions; student union ban; campus conflict; qualitative research; University of the Punjab; Pakistan; youth political participation; thematic analysis

Introduction: Student political wings and unions have historically occupied a central role in higher education systems worldwide, functioning as nurseries of democratic culture, leadership development, and civic participation. In many countries,

these organizations have served as platforms through which young citizens develop their political consciousness, learn the art of negotiation and debate, and contribute meaningfully to the governance of their academic communities. However, in Pakistan, the landscape of student political activity has been dramatically constrained since 1984, when the military government of General Zia-ul-Haq imposed a ban on student unions through Martial Law Order No. 1371 on February 9, 1984 (Ahmed, 2022; Shnakhat, 2024). Paradoxically, while formal

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student unions were prohibited, student political unions affiliated with major national parties continued to operate on campuses, creating an unregulated, unaccountable environment that has given rise to complex tensions between institutional authority and student political expression (Dawn, 2024).

Scholarly literature underscores the vital role that student unions and political organizations play within educational settings. Brooks et al. (2015), examining students' unions in the United Kingdom, found that these bodies have evolved significantly in their function, shifting from purely recreational roles toward active representation of student interests in university governance and decision-making. Similarly, research conducted across multiple European contexts established that students who experienced democratic practices within educational institutions were considerably more likely to participate in civic and political activities in adult life (Kiess, 2022). These findings affirm that student organizations within universities are not peripheral bodies; they are foundational mechanisms through which democratic values are transmitted from one generation to the next.

The relationship between youth political participation and democratic consolidation has been extensively theorized in social science literature. Saud and Ashfaq (2024), examining youth political participation in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan argued that the meaningful engagement of young people has the potential to transform traditional patterns of political practice and introduce new dynamics of accountability and representation. Likewise, research in the domain of civic education has demonstrated that the integration of political participation opportunities into the university environment enhances democratic engagement and

nurtures a generation of informed and active citizens (Lorenzo & Joia, 2024). When students are denied formal channels for political expression, their political energies do not disappear; rather, they are redirected into informal and often unaccountable channels, increasing the risk of radicalization, apathy, or violence (Yasir, Baloch & Hassan, 2023).

The history of student political organizations in Pakistan reflects the broader struggles over democracy, authoritarianism, and civil society within the country. Prior to the ban, student unions were vibrant democratic institutions that produced some of Pakistan's most prominent political figures, served as forums for ideological debate, and played an active role in mass political movements, including the movement that ultimately led to the resignation of Field Marshal Ayub Khan in 1969 (Paradigm Shift, 2022). The official justification for the 1984 ban was the rising incidence of violence and political interference in academic institutions; however, this rationale has been widely challenged by scholars and commentators, who note that campus violence has increased substantially in the decades following the ban, rather than diminishing (Mannan, n.d.; Express Tribune, 2022). Evidence has documented that during the 36 years of active student unions prior to the ban, only 13 student fatalities were recorded due to campus violence, while the post-ban period witnessed a dramatic escalation in disorder (JamiatPK, 2025).

A critical distinction must be drawn between formally constituted student unions, which operate through democratic elections and constitutional mandates, and the student political unions or fronts that are affiliated with national political parties. While the former have been banned since 1984, the latter have continued to operate across university campuses in Pakistan, including

the University of the Punjab, where factions affiliated with political parties such as Islami Jamiat Talaba (IJT) and others maintain a visible and influential presence (Dawn, 2019; Academia Magazine, 2024). The persistence of these unregulated political unions, in the absence of legitimate student union structures, has been associated with an increase in campus conflicts, factional violence, and a deterioration of the academic environment (Shnakhat, 2024; SDPI, 2023). The tensions between student political unions and the university administration at the University of the Punjab reflect a microcosm of the broader national challenge of managing student political activity in the absence of a formal democratic framework.

The imposition of the ban has also contributed to a broader culture of political disengagement among Pakistani university students. Yasir and colleagues (2023) found that the absence of formal spaces for political expression within educational institutions has constrained students' capacity to engage in political discourse and debate, thereby promoting political apathy among the wider student body. Furthermore, the climate of fear associated with unregulated political activity, including threats of harassment and violence from party-affiliated student groups, has discouraged many students from participating in campus political life at all (Yasir, Balcoh & Hassan, 2023). Scholars have argued that this political drought has had lasting consequences for the quality of political leadership at the national level, as the universities have ceased to function as training grounds for future democratic leaders (Shnakhat, 2024; Express Tribune, 2022).

The University of the Punjab, as one of Pakistan's oldest and most prominent public universities, represents a particularly significant site for examining the dynamics of student political activity under the

conditions of the ban. The university has a long and complex history of student political engagement and has been at the center of several notable episodes of campus conflict involving student political unions (PU News, 2022; The Nation, 2024). Despite this significance, systematic qualitative inquiry into the lived experiences of students at the University of the Punjab regarding the ban on student political unions, their perceptions of these organizations, and the relationship between the ban and campus conflict remains limited. This study seeks to address that gap by employing a qualitative research methodology to investigate the condition and role of students' political unions, the perceptions of fellow students toward these organizations, and the impact of the ban on conflict and violence within the institution.

Guided by an interpretivist epistemological framework, this study is oriented around five central research questions: whether students' political unions and unions are essential in educational institutions; what the current situation and condition of students' political unions is at the University of the Punjab; what contributions or roles these organizations play within the university context; how other students perceive students' political unions and unions; and whether the ban on these unions has caused conflicts and violence, and if so, how. By exploring these questions through in-depth qualitative inquiry, this study aims to generate nuanced insights into the intersection of student politics, institutional governance, and democratic development within one of Pakistan's most consequential academic environments. The findings are expected to contribute to the growing scholarly discourse on student political participation and to offer evidence-based recommendations for policymakers and university administrators regarding the

future of student political representation in Pakistan.

Methodology: A qualitative, exploratory research design was selected to address the research objectives. Given the limited existing empirical literature on the effects of the ban on student political unions specifically within Pakistani public universities (Neuman, 2014), an exploratory design was appropriate for generating initial, in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. Qualitative methods are particularly well-suited to examining complex social processes, power dynamics, and the subjective meanings that participants attach to their experiences (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Neuman, 2006).

This study did not seek statistical generalizability. Rather, it aimed for analytical and cross-contextual generalizability, that is, the transfer of conceptual insights developed within the University of the Punjab context to comparable institutional settings in Pakistan and other developing-country contexts where student political activity is restricted.

The philosophical foundation of this study is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, which holds that social reality is not objective and fixed, but is actively constructed by individuals through their experiences, meanings, and social interactions (Phillimore & Goodson, 2004). This ontological position, rooted in constructivism, views knowledge as situated, context-dependent, and intersubjective. Accordingly, the ban on student political unions and its consequences cannot be meaningfully understood through numerical measurement alone; they must be explored through the lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of those who inhabit the university environment.

Epistemologically, this interpretivist stance aligns with a reflexive, dialogic

approach to knowledge generation. The researcher does not stand apart from the phenomenon under study but actively participates in the co-construction of meaning through iterative engagement with participants (Finlay, 2002; Ortlipp, 2008). This position privileges depth, nuance, and contextual understanding over statistical generalizability, making qualitative interviewing and focus group discussion the most appropriate methods of inquiry.

COREQ Compliance: In accordance with best practices in qualitative reporting, this paper was written following the criteria outlined in the COREQ (Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research) checklist developed by Tong et al. (2007). The COREQ checklist comprises 32 items across three domains: (1) Research Team and Reflexivity; (2) Study Design; and (3) Analysis and Findings. Adherence to these criteria ensures that all essential methodological decisions are transparently reported, enabling readers to critically evaluate the rigor and credibility of the findings.

Research Site: The research was conducted at the University of the Punjab, Quaid-e-Azam Campus, Lahore, one of Pakistan's oldest and most prominent public universities. This site was selected purposively for two main reasons. First, the university hosts multiple active student political unions representing diverse ideological, ethnic, and regional constituencies including Islami Jamiat-e-Talaba (IJT), the Pashtun Educational and Development Movement (PEDM), the Baloch Council, the Gilgit and Chitral Students' Council, and the Progressive Students' Council. Second, the university has been a prominent site of campus political conflict, making it a particularly data-rich context for this inquiry.

Target Population and Sampling: The target population comprised undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled at the University of the Punjab, Quaid-e-Azam Campus. The student body was conceptually divided into two sub-groups: (1) generic students, those not formally affiliated with any student political union; and (2) political participants, active members or leaders of one of the political unions.

Two complementary sampling strategies were employed. Purposive sampling was used to recruit generic students, ensuring representation across genders, years of study, and departmental backgrounds. Snowball sampling was applied for political participants, given the sensitivity of political affiliation and the relative difficulty of initial access. Early contacts within each union were asked to recommend further participants within their networks.

The final sample comprised 30 participants: 15 generic students (8 female, 7 male) and 15 political participants (2-3 from different political unions). This sample size was determined to be sufficient for thematic saturation within the exploratory scope of the study (Neuman, 2014).

Data Sources and Data Collection

Tools: Data were gathered from primary sources collected through semi-structured open-ended interviews conducted with political participants and focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted with generic student body.

Both interviews and FGDs were facilitated by semi-structured guides, developed in accordance with the central research objectives and refined through iterative review. Questions were sequenced logically, beginning with broad, open-ended questions about awareness of student political unions before progressing to more specific probes concerning their roles,

impacts, and relationship to campus violence. The instrument was originally prepared in English and subsequently translated into Urdu to ensure accessibility for all participants, irrespective of their fluency in English. The final version of the guides was submitted to and formally approved by the research supervisor prior to data collection. Interviews and FGDs lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes each and were conducted in locations convenient to participants, including campus site, study areas, and common rooms, to minimize disruption and promote candid responses.

Interviews and FGDs were facilitated by a researcher and supported by a dedicated note-taker who documented key discussion points, non-verbal cues, and group dynamics. The researcher introduced themselves to each participant before commencing the interview and FGD, explained the study objectives, and obtained informed consent. Standard procedural formalities were observed: formal invitations were extended, a quiet and comfortable setting was arranged, participants were oriented to the topic, the discussion was systematically facilitated and closed with a debriefing. All FGDs and interviews were audio-recorded using digital voice recorders and smartphones, with full battery and storage capacity verified before each session.

Data Analysis: Recorded interviews and FGDs were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were read multiple times by the lead researcher to achieve familiarization with the data. Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis procedure: (1) familiarization with the data; (2) generation of initial codes; (3) searching for themes among codes; (4) reviewing and refining themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the final report. Coding was conducted manually, with color-coded annotations applied to printed

transcripts. A secondary review of the coding framework was conducted by the research supervisor to enhance credibility. Themes were derived inductively from the data, without imposing a priori theoretical categories.

Ethical Considerations: The study adhered to established ethical principles for qualitative social research throughout. All participants provided voluntary, informed consent prior to participation. They were clearly briefed on the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any point without consequence, and the intended use of the data.

Participant anonymity and confidentiality were rigorously maintained. No identifying information was disclosed in any research output; all identifiable details were removed from transcripts, and participants were referred to by generic descriptors (e.g., 'male generic student', 'female political participant'). Participants were explicitly assured that their contributions would not be shared with university administration, political affiliates, or any other third party.

Data security was ensured through password-protected storage of all digital recordings and transcripts, accessible only to the research team. In recognition of the politically sensitive context of the study, particularly the risk of retaliation against political participants, special care was taken to ensure that no participant could be identified from published findings.

Reflexivity: One of the researchers' statuses as the Information Secretary/

Table 1: Themes, Sub-Themes and Codes

Theme	Subtheme	Codes
1. Participants' Opinions About Student Political Unions	Awareness of student political unions	Familiarity with dominant unions; Limited awareness of smaller unions; Visibility on campus
	Negative perceptions	Violence; Campus chaos; Coercion; Sectarianism; Ethnic favoritism; Intimidation

Spokesperson of Peoples Students' Federation, Pakistan's Peoples Party, constitutes both a methodological advantage, facilitating access and rapport, and a potential source of bias. To mitigate subjectivity, the researchers maintained a reflexive journal throughout the fieldwork and analysis phases, documenting personal assumptions, emerging interpretations, and emotional responses to the data (Koch & Harrington, 1998; Ortlipp, 2008). These reflections were shared with the supervising faculty member, who provided an external perspective and helped ensure that interpretive claims remained grounded in participant data rather than researcher presumption.

Results: Data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), yielding seven major themes: (1) participants' general opinions about student political unions (2) the perceived role of student political unions within the university; (3) the impact of student political unions on individual students; (4) the impact of student political unions on the broader campus environment; (5) the perceived advantages and disadvantages of student political unions membership; (6) the motivations behind joining student political unions; and (7) participants' views on whether student political unions should be banned or allowed to function. Throughout the presentation of findings, verbatim participant quotations, identified by gender and role (generic student or political participant), are used to evidence and illustrate each theme. Table 1 shows the themes, subthemes and the initial codes.

	Positive perceptions	Student-centered activities; Study circles; Knowledge sharing; Inclusive participation
	Organizational concerns	Weak organizational structure; Poor leadership; Ineffective functioning; Failure to achieve student welfare
2. Perceived Role of Student Political Unions	Failure to fulfill representative role	Neglect of student interests; Internal conflicts; Political rivalry; Lack of productivity
	Advocacy and student support	Hostel issue resolution; Cafeteria negotiations; Student representation; Administrative accountability
	Leadership responsibilities	Financial assistance; Student guidance; Welfare advocacy
	Structural barriers	Ban on unions; Lack of legal recognition; Limited authority; Restricted functioning
3. Impact on Individual Students	Psychological impacts	Fear; Mental stress; Anxiety; Reduced peace of mind; Emotional distress
	Academic impacts	Loss of concentration; Disrupted learning; Poor academic performance
	Social and personal interference	Moral policing; Restriction of recreational activities; Interference with personal freedom
	Physical safety concerns	Harassment; Physical violence; Threats; Intimidation
	Positive educational experiences	Peer learning; Academic support; Study circles; Increased confidence
4. Impact on Campus Environment	Campus insecurity	Frequent clashes; Police intervention; Unsafe environment; Fear among students
	Institutional reputation	Negative media coverage; Damaged university image; Reduced attractiveness for admissions
	Family and community concerns	Parental anxiety; Social embarrassment; Concerns about student safety
	Causes of conflict	Sectarian dominance; Competition between unions; Inter-group hostility
	Positive institutional resilience	University prestige maintained; Reputation beyond political conflict
5. Perceived Advantages and Disadvantages of Membership	Benefits for members	Political networking; Social support; Personal security; Leadership development; Advocacy experience
	Personal costs	Academic neglect; Career risks; Stigma; Disciplinary consequences
	Unequal distribution of benefits	Benefits limited to members; Lack of benefits for ordinary students
	Collective benefits	Student recognition; Cultural promotion; Student advocacy
6. Motivations for Joining Student Political Unions	Personal motivations	Desire for power; Recognition; Identity; Psychological needs; Family political background
	Community service	Helping marginalized students; Regional support; Student welfare
	Political and democratic engagement	Leadership development; Political awareness; Democratic participation; Rights advocacy
	Ethnic and regional identity	Minority representation; Regional solidarity; Community empowerment

	Civic development	Practical learning; National development; Social responsibility
7. Views on the Ban on Student Political Unions	Support for complete ban	Elimination of violence; Strong administrative control; Improved discipline
	Support for regulated unions	Legal recognition; Accountability; Monitoring mechanisms; Merit-based leadership; Institutional oversight
	Support for restoring unions	Democratic rights; Constitutional freedom of association; Political accountability; Student representation
	Consequences of the ban	Increased violence after prohibition; Lack of democratic channels; Student disempowerment

Theme 1: Participants' Opinions About Student Political Unions: Participants demonstrated a wide spectrum of awareness and opinion regarding the student political unions operating on campus. While virtually all generic students were familiar with some of the unions because of the dominant and highly visible presence, awareness of other smaller unions was more variable. Opinions ranged from outright rejection to cautious support, with the majority of generic students expressing ambivalence or critical concern.

Several generic students highlighted the dominance of sectarian unions and associated them primarily with disruptive and coercive conduct. As one male generic student observed:

"I know only about xyz sectarian union (anonymized) because this is the most dominant and prominent union in our campus and it is mainly because it always creates chaos in the campus. I have heard so much about them from friends and seen as well that they only create violence and keep knocking their nose in others' business, which is unacceptable for me."

This perception of sectarian union as synonymous with campus disorder was echoed by a female generic student, who drew a distinction between the exclusionary ethnic orientation of some unions and the absence of support for local, non-affiliated students:

"I have always seen them quarrelling with each other and creating a chaotic environment in the university, but I have also seen some of the groups helping others, but they only help the people who belong to their ethnic group. There is no help for local students."

A contrasting perspective emerged in relation to one of the progressive unions, which multiple participants credited as genuinely student-centered. One male generic student, reflecting on his own experience, stated:

"There are some groups which are promoting ethnicity, but the group of progressive students is very helpful. This is the only group which actually conducts study circles and anyone can join those circles just for the sake of information and knowledge. I too, once attended it."

A recurring concern among generic students was the perceived structural weakness of student political unions, their lack of organization and their failure to translate political presence into tangible student welfare outcomes. As one male respondent summarized:

"I think that the student political unions in our campus have no structure; they are not well organized. In fact, our actions are limited in university because of these student unions as they are not in their raw form. If they perform their actual functions, it would become productive for every student."

Theme 2: The Role of Student Political Unions: Participants were asked about the current roles being performed by student political unions and the extent to which these matched their perceived mandate. Findings revealed a persistent gap between the ideal and actual functioning of these organizations, with most generic students expressing skepticism about their effectiveness, even as political participants articulated more aspirational accounts of their work.

A number of generic students reported that student political unions were failing to serve the student body. One female respondent stated:

"Observing the current situation of campus, I would say that none of the student political unions is fulfilling their roles. They are wasting their energy in fighting with opposition parties rather than working on their agenda. Such student political unions who don't work for students are of no use."

Others pointed to the motivational deficit among members, suggesting that participation was primarily self-interested rather than service-oriented. Another female generic student remarked:

"I think they just join parties to be in power, so whenever they are in any problem their peer group should support them. If they join the party with this thought, how can they possibly work for students?"

However, positive functional contributions were also acknowledged. Several hostelite students described student political unions as effective advocates in securing institutional responsiveness on practical matters, such as cafeteria pricing and hostel conditions:

"Sometimes we face issues like the cafeteria rate goes quite high. In such cases I have seen student political unions quite effective. Or any other issue in hostel is quickly resolved by the political unions."

Summarizing, whenever the administration is not working in the favor of students, student political unions are there to form an organized setting."

Political participants offered more committed accounts of their roles. One of the leaders of student unions described his efforts to advocate for financially struggling students:

"At times people share their personal problems with me that they can't afford the expenses of university and hostels. Being a leader of the union I help few of them, but I can't help them all. I am working on the most effective ways to improve the condition of such matters."

A significant finding was the reported interference of the ban on formalized student unions with the capacity of political unions to fulfil a legitimate representative role. As one political participant noted:

"Before the ban, the unions had a formal structure. As unions now are not legalized, we can't achieve our roles to the fullest because of these limitations."

Theme 3: Impact of Student Political Unions on Individual Students: This theme captures the direct experiential consequences, both negative and positive, that student political unions activity had on the day-to-day lives of generic students. The overwhelming majority of accounts documented negative impacts, ranging from psychological distress and academic disruption to instances of physical harassment and coercive moral policing.

One female generic student recounted a particularly distressing incident involving a sectarian union member at her graduation celebration:

"It was the last day of my graduation. I was having fun with my class in the ground, and few members of xyz sectarian union (anonymized) came and stopped us. No one from the administration restricted any of our

actions. However, they first stopped us and then, after few minutes when we didn't stop, they came in a group and started reciting Quran. It was such a shameful act, we respect our Holy Book, so that's why we stopped. But who are they to stop us from an act that is not even wrong?"

Interference in social and recreational activities was a recurring complaint. A female student described the disruption of her university's sports week:

"It was our sports week. Firstly, xyz sectarian union (anonymized) forcefully stopped the music and then played their own anthem. Students asked for help from members of other union, and they came and played their song, which resulted in a fight between both parties. But who suffered in all this? The students. Our whole sports week was spoiled."

Physical violence directed at generic students was also reported. One female respondent described an unprovoked assault:

"Once I was sitting in the ground with two female friends and a male friend from another department. Few members of xyz sectarian union (xyz) came and started interrogating him without any reason, and then they beat him badly. They misbehaved with me as well. I was so personally disturbed that I took a leave for a week from university."

The academic toll of student political unions-related conflict was also documented, with several students reporting that the constant threat of violence undermined their capacity to concentrate and perform:

"Student political unions standing opposite to each other causes a chaotic environment in the university. This disturbs the study environment. Students come here to study, but such situations destroy their peace of mind. I personally face mental pressure and become defocused from education."

By contrast, one female student who had encountered the progressive student union described a highly positive experience:

"When I came new in this department, I found it difficult to understand some theories and I was getting low grades. Once, a senior recommended me to attend the study circle of a progressive student union. I had great respect for this group; it proved to be very helpful. Anyone can join those study circles and share their knowledge. If such groups are what we call student unions, then all students should join student unions."

Theme 4: Impact of Student Political Unions on the Campus Environment:

Beyond their effects on individual students, student political unions' activities were perceived to have significant implications for the institutional reputation and safety environment of the University. Many participants expressed distress at what they perceived as the transformation of an academic institution into a site of recurring conflict.

One female hostelite captured this sentiment:

"This happens often, two parties fight with each other, as a result of which police force comes for protection and all this gets media coverage. Firstly, such things destroy the repute of the university. Secondly, I get so many calls from friends and family asking if I am safe. I feel ashamed that my university has become more like a war zone and less a platform for education."

Another female participant expressed concern about the chilling effect of violence on enrolment decisions:

"I would never recommend any friend of mine to take admission here. My cousins have spent their university time so smoothly, and here we face this chaotic, disturbed environment. Parents feel insecure sending their child to this institute because of its repute."

A political participant from one of the unions offered a structural explanation for the persistent conflict, attributing the campus disorder primarily to sectarian unions' long-standing dominance and its perceived hostility toward minority groups:

"xvy sectarian union (anonymized) has been a stakeholder of the university for many years, so they cannot bear anyone else at their place. They try to keep others in terror. They are the ones creating chaos and disturbing the university environment. However, we have quite positive relationships with other unions, whenever they conduct an event, they invite us, and vice versa."

Not all participants, however, viewed the reputational damage as permanent. A minority held the view that the university's longstanding prestige insulated it from lasting harm, noting that institutional reputation was shaped by broader academic achievements rather than episodic campus conflicts.

Theme 5: Perceived Advantages and Disadvantages of Student Unions' Membership: Participants articulated a range of perceived costs and benefits associated with student political unions' membership, revealing a divergence in perspective between generic students (who overwhelmingly cited disadvantages for themselves) and political participants (who emphasized personal and community-oriented benefits).

Generic students generally felt that the primary beneficiaries of student political unions involvement were the members themselves, not the broader student body:

"Members of student political unions are the only ones in benefit because of their peer group. They get power, security, and they make their references strong."

Several participants observed that membership carried significant personal

risks, including academic derailment and social stigma:

"Being a part of student unions, members distant themselves from education and risk their career life. They join unions just for their own protection and fame."

One student described a cautionary example from his own peer group:

"One of my class fellows was a political participant and got struck off from university because of some violent act. I think he would have been spared with a warning if he were a generic student, but as he was tagged as a political participant, his career finished."

Conversely, political participants themselves articulated more nuanced accounts of the benefits of involvement, including skills development, advocacy experience, and upward political mobility:

"When I joined university, I faced so many issues being a minority, lack of communication and references. So, I made my agenda to help the people of my region. I found student unions as a platform to achieve my goals."

A small number of generic students also acknowledged modest collective benefits attributable to SPW advocacy, such as the securing of recognition and awards for students involved in cultural and dramatic activities.

Theme 6: Motivations for Joining Student Political Unions: Participants offered diverse accounts of why students chose to join student political unions. These motivations ranged from instrumentally political to deeply communitarian and ideological, revealing the heterogeneous character of student political mobilization at the university.

Some generic students viewed student political unions membership as an instrument of ambition or personal security:

"I have observed that those students who mostly join student political unions belong to a political family background who are already fond of exercising power. Also, students who have some kind of inferiority complex participate because through this platform they get importance and attention, basically, this is a psychological need."

Political participants, by contrast, articulated motivations grounded in community service, rights advocacy, and national democratic engagement:

"Students are unaware of the benefits of being a part of politics. The only way to change the condition of our country is to become active in politics and take positive steps. If we keep moving with the same approach that politics is bad, then the leaders will keep ruling according to their own interests and we will continue to suffer."

Ethnic solidarity was an explicit motivator for members of regional and ethnic unions:

"When I joined university, I faced so many issues being a minority, lack of communication and references. So, I made my agenda to help the people of my region and try my best to serve them. I found student unions as a platform to achieve my goals."

A member from one of the progressive unions offered a more broadly civic framing, emphasizing the transformative value of political participation for national development:

"Students need to be trained rather than just passing exams and getting a degree. They need a sense of leadership; only then can they get a better place in society. This platform provides us awareness of our fundamental rights and we get to learn so much in practical life."

Theme 7: Views on the Ban — Should Student Political Unions Be Banned?: The seventh and final theme directly addressed the central research

question: does the ban on student political unions produce beneficial outcomes for the university, or does it generate new forms of conflict and disempowerment? Participant views were diverse and nuanced, but three broadly distinct positions were identifiable: those who supported a complete ban; those who advocated regulated legalization; and those who supported unconditional restoration.

A minority of generic students, frustrated by the persistent disorder associated with student political unions, argued for their complete prohibition:

"There should be a complete ban on student political unions. Despite the fact that student unions are banned, we still see them in our institute. If your administration is strong enough, you don't need any student union. So, management should be improved for students rather than making student political unions."

The more prevalent position among generic students, however, was that student political unions should be permitted to operate but within a regulated, accountable framework:

"There's no need to ban student political unions, but they should be under control. Their actions should be limited. Things should be legalized by keeping a proper check on parties."

"I think participants in a student union should be selected according to merit, their qualities should be tested to check if they are capable. There should be proper checks on student political unions by creating a committee for their supervision. This is the only solution to make our student political unions better."

Political participants were emphatic in linking the violence that followed the 1984 ban to the removal of democratic accountability from campus politics:

"If you observe the ratio of murders before and after Zia's ban on parties, you will note that circumstances went extreme after the ban. A large population of our country consists of youth who are very spirited, their energy should not be wasted. Political unions should be un-banned so students who have secular thought can join student political unions and bring progress."

A progressive student leader offered perhaps the most constitutionally grounded argument, citing Article 17 of Pakistan's 1973 Constitution, which guarantees the right of association:

"In the 1973 Constitution of Pakistan it says that any individual can make their own union. But current circumstances have ruined this. This is complete injustice; students are facing issues while the administration is living a luxurious life. No one is raising the voice of students or speaking for their rights."

Summary of Findings: The findings reveal a deeply contested and paradoxical landscape. Student political unions at the University of the Punjab are simultaneously perceived as vehicles for representation, community solidarity, and civic development, and as sources of intimidation, academic disruption, and institutional reputational harm. The ban on formal student unions has not eliminated political activity from campus; rather, it has displaced it into unregulated party-affiliated unions operating without democratic accountability or institutional oversight. The resulting environment is characterized by factional competition, ethnic polarization, and recurring violence, outcomes that most participants attributed not to the nature of student politics per se, but to the absence of a legitimate, structured framework for its expression.

Discussion: One of the most significant findings of this study is that the 1984 ban on student unions at the University

of the Punjab has not succeeded in depoliticizing the campus. Rather, it has redirected political energies from formally constituted, democratically elected unions into unaccountable party-affiliated political wings. This finding aligns closely with the observation by Yasir and colleagues (2023) that the ban has produced political displacement rather than political elimination, creating a vacuum in which unregulated factions operate without institutional checks. The persistence of different political unions decades after the ban, operating openly on a campus where formal unions are prohibited, is, in the words of Dawn (2019), deeply paradoxical: the organization blamed for introducing weapons to campus continues to operate, while the democratic institution of the student union remains suppressed.

This paradox resonates with Brooks et al.'s (2015) argument that student unions serve an inherently moderating function: by providing institutionalized channels for political contestation and representation, they channel student energies into constructive democratic practice rather than allowing them to accumulate into unregulated confrontation. The findings of this study confirm that in the absence of such channels, factional conflict at the University of the Punjab has intensified rather than diminished, a pattern documented more broadly across Pakistani universities by the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (2023).

The findings reveal a widespread recognition among participants, including many generic students who are critical of current student political unions conduct, that student political organizations serve a legitimate and necessary democratic function within universities. Students articulated an understanding of student political unions as essential intermediaries between the student

body and the university administration, particularly when institutional channels of grievance redress are perceived to be inadequate or captured by administrative interests.

This understanding is consistent with Watfa and Ait Ali (2025), which found that students who experience democratic representation within their educational institutions demonstrate significantly higher levels of civic engagement and political efficacy in subsequent life. Similarly, Saud and Ashfaq (2024) demonstrated that meaningful youth political participation has transformative potential for democratic culture in Pakistan, shifting entrenched political patterns and introducing new forms of accountability. The students in this study who described the study circles, fee advocacy, and activity organization by few progressive student unions as genuinely valuable were, in effect, articulating a vision of what democratic student representation could look like, and recognizing how far the current environment falls short of that ideal.

The constitutional dimension of this issue also emerged clearly in the data. Participants invoked Article 17 of the 1973 Constitution of Pakistan, which guarantees the freedom of association, as a basis for arguing that the continued ban on student unions is not only politically counterproductive but legally unjustifiable. This aligns with the position advanced by legal scholars and civil society organizations who have consistently argued that the 1992 Supreme Court reimposition of the ban was constitutionally dubious and practically harmful (Shnakhat, 2024).

A recurrent theme across the findings was the ethnic or ideologically exclusionary character of several of the student political wings operating at the University of the Punjab. Different progressive and ethnic unions were acknowledged by their own

members as primarily serving the interests of students from their respective ethnic or regional communities, while generic students from the local Punjab community, arguably the majority constituency, perceived themselves as being without a representative body.

This fragmentation of student political representation along ethnic lines reflects a broader structural dynamic in Pakistani politics, where national political parties have historically mobilized along ethnic, regional, and sectarian lines rather than developing broad-based programmatic platforms. The absence of a formalized, democratically elected student union, which would, by design, represent all students regardless of origin, has created a representational vacuum that is filled by ethno-political wings. This finding extends earlier observations by Mannan (n.d.) and the Express Tribune (2022) about the effects of the ban on inclusive student representation, and suggests that the restoration of formal student union elections would need to be accompanied by institutional mechanisms to ensure cross-ethnic and cross-ideological representation.

Perhaps the most contested and politically consequential finding concerns the relationship between the ban and campus violence. The official justification for the 1984 ban, that student unions were the primary source of campus violence, is directly challenged by the data collected in this study. Participants consistently described violence on campus as a post-ban phenomenon, driven primarily by the rivalry between unaccountable party-affiliated wings and the absence of institutional mechanisms for conflict resolution.

This finding corroborates the analysis presented by JamiatPK (2025), which compared violence statistics in the pre-ban and post-ban periods and found that campus

fatalities increased dramatically following the prohibition of formal unions. It also aligns with the argument advanced by Dawn (2024) that the violence associated with the current campus environment is qualitatively different from that of the union era, it is no longer embedded within ideological contestation and democratic accountability, but rather reflects petty territorial disputes between unregulated factions with no institutional stake in campus welfare.

The findings from this study thus lend empirical support to the theoretical argument that the formalization and democratic institutionalization of student political representation, through proper union elections, constitutional frameworks, and institutional oversight, would be more effective in reducing campus violence than the continuation of the ban. This position is supported by the comparative international evidence reviewed by Brooks et al. (2015) and Watfa and Ait Ali (2025), which demonstrates that student representation structures in the UK and Europe are associated with more peaceful and productive campus environments, not the reverse.

The data reveal a persistent gap between the mandated and actual functioning of student political unions. Political participants articulated an idealistic vision of their organizations as vehicles for student welfare, rights advocacy, and political education. Generic students, however, predominantly described student unions as failing to realize this mandate, prioritizing internal factional competition, ethnic solidarity, and the exercise of coercive authority over genuine service delivery. This finding is consistent with the observations of Yasir and colleagues (2023), which documented how the ban has deformed student political culture, replacing the democratic practices of elections, coalition-

building, and accountability with a culture of intimidation and entitlement.

Importantly, however, the data also contain evidence of effective student political union functioning, particularly from few progressive unions. The academic support provided through study circles, advocacy to the Vice Chancellor for student awards, and assistance in obtaining administrative permissions, all described by generic students in positive terms, suggest that the conditions for constructive student political representation exist within the university, even under the constrained circumstances of the ban. This indicates that the problem is not inherent to student political organization per se, but rather to the lack of a formal democratic framework that incentivizes accountability and service orientation.

The collective weight of the findings suggests three principal policy implications. First, the continued ban on student unions at the University of the Punjab is not achieving its stated objectives. It has not reduced campus violence, depoliticized student life, or improved the academic environment. Instead, it has created a disordered landscape of unaccountable political factionalism. The case for restoring formalized, democratically elected student unions, with appropriate constitutional frameworks and institutional oversight, is empirically supported by this study and consistent with the position of the Punjab University Vice Chancellor (PU News, 2022) and wider civil society advocacy (SDPI, 2023).

Second, any restoration of student union elections must be accompanied by institutional safeguards to prevent the replication of the exclusionary ethnic dynamics documented in this study. Mechanisms such as proportional representation, anti-discrimination provisions, and independent electoral oversight would be essential to ensuring that

restored unions serve all students rather than replicating partisan or ethnic fragmentation.

Third, the university administration must be recognized as a critical variable in the campus conflict equation. Multiple participants identified administrative passivity, the failure to take action against demonstrably disruptive wings, as a root cause of the violence and disorder documented in this study. Institutional leadership, transparent governance, and consistent application of disciplinary procedures are prerequisites for any improvement in the campus environment, with or without the restoration of formal student unions.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. The study was conducted at a single university campus, limiting the transferability of findings to other institutional contexts in Pakistan. The sample, while purposively and appropriately selected, was relatively small ($n = 30$), and the reliance on self-report data means that accounts of violence and misconduct cannot be independently verified. Future research employing longitudinal designs, larger samples across multiple universities, or comparative cross-national designs would substantially extend the evidence base.

On the basis of the findings and discussion, the study offers four recommendations:

- The Government of Punjab and the University of the Punjab administration should initiate a structured dialogue, engaging students, faculty, civil society, and political representatives, toward the formal restoration of democratically elected student unions, with appropriate constitutional frameworks and independent electoral oversight.

- Any restored union framework must incorporate safeguards against ethnic exclusion and ideological

monopoly, including proportional representation mechanisms and anti-discrimination provisions, to ensure that restored unions serve the entire student body.

- The university administration must enforce existing disciplinary regulations consistently and transparently, holding student political wings accountable for acts of violence, coercion, and harassment, regardless of the political affiliations of those responsible.

- Further qualitative and mixed-methods research should be conducted across multiple Pakistani universities to generate a broader evidence base for national policy reform on student political representation.

Conclusion: The University of the Punjab, with its long history of student political engagement and its status as Pakistan's largest public university, represents a critical site for understanding the consequences of state intervention in campus democracy. The findings of this study demonstrate that the four-decade prohibition on student unions has failed on its own terms: it has not eliminated student political activity, reduced campus violence, or produced a more conducive academic environment. What it has produced is a fragmented, unaccountable landscape of party-affiliated wings that serve narrow interests rather than the democratic needs of the student body as a whole.

The students of the University of the Punjab, generic and political participants alike, understand the necessity of legitimate democratic representation. They articulate, sometimes in the most direct of terms, that the absence of formal unions has left them without a voice and without protection. Restoring that voice, through carefully designed, democratically accountable student union structures, is not merely a matter of students' rights. It is an investment in the

democratic health of Pakistan's future civic and political leadership.

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Declaration Section

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Conflict of Interest: The author SH is the Information Secretary/ Spokesperson of Peoples Students’ Federation, Pakistan’s Peoples Party, Pakistan. This status constitutes both a methodological advantage, facilitating access and rapport, and a potential source of bias. To mitigate subjectivity, the researchers maintained a reflexive journal throughout the fieldwork and analysis phases, documenting personal assumptions, emerging interpretations, and emotional responses to the data.

Ethical Consideration: The study adhered to established ethical principles for qualitative social research throughout. All participants provided voluntary, informed consent prior to participation. They were clearly briefed on the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any point without consequence, and the intended use of the data.

Consent to Participate: Verbal consent was taken from all the participants prior to their participation.

Availability of Data: The data is available from corresponding author upon reasonable request