

1 **Student Unions in Pakistan: Historical Ban, Benefits, Challenges, and** 2 **Their Role in Democratic Participation.**

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6 **Abstract**

7 Student unions in Pakistan historically provided platforms for youth leadership,
8 representation, and democratic engagement. Since independence, they enabled
9 students to participate in campus affairs and broader political debates. With the
10 passage of time, unions became linked with violence, political rivalries, and fears of
11 radicalization, leading successive governments, especially under military regimes, to
12 impose bans. Media portrayals often reinforced negative perceptions, strengthening
13 public support for restrictions. The ban resulted in declining student participation, loss
14 of structured representation, and the rise of informal groups that sometimes fueled
15 unrest. This weakened democratic culture and limited opportunities for dialogue and
16 leadership development. By comparing regulated student unions in India, the UK, and
17 the US, the study highlights their benefits in leadership training and policy advocacy.
18 It concludes that revival under transparent governance is essential to encourage
19 peaceful participation, strengthen democratic values, and prepare future leaders in
20 Pakistan.

21 **Keywords:** Student unions, Youth leadership, Democratic engagement, Campus
22 violence, Political rivalries, Military regimes, Media portrayals, Decline in
23 participation, Informal groups, Intellectual culture.

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31 Introduction

32 Student unions in Pakistan have historically been important platforms for youth
33 leadership and democratic engagement. Since independence in 1947, students went
34 beyond academics to influence political thought, challenge colonial legacies, and
35 participate in movements for democracy and social justice. Many future leaders,
36 including Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Benazir Bhutto, began their political journeys
37 through student activism. Over the decades, student politics shifted from constructive
38 engagement in the 1950s–60s to turbulent times in the 1970s–80s, marked by
39 ideological clashes, violence, and state crackdowns. Military regimes, political party
40 interference, and the spread of weapons on campuses changed public perceptions,
41 turning unions from centers of activism into areas of conflict. The ban on student
42 unions in 1984 further reduced formal student participation, leaving informal groups
43 to fill the gap.

44 Today, the absence of recognized unions has weakened democratic culture in
45 universities, limited leadership opportunities, and reduced youth political awareness.
46 Globally, student unions are seen as vital for civic participation, accountability, and
47 leadership training. With proper safeguards and transparent governance, Pakistan's
48 student unions could once again serve as constructive platforms for dialogue,
49 representation, and preparing future leaders.

50 Background of the study

51 Student unions in Pakistan emerged after independence as small campus groups
52 focused on academics and culture, but by the 1950s–70s they evolved into strong
53 political forces. Organizations like the Democratic Students Federation and Islami
54 Jamiat-e-Talaba became active, and students played a central role in protests against
55 Ayub Khan and other governments. Over time, however, unions became associated
56 with violence, rivalry, and interference from political parties, which shifted public
57 perception and created pressure for restrictions. In 1984, under Zia-ul-Haq, the
58 Prohibition of Students' Unions Act formally banned all union activities, citing unrest
59 and fears of radicalization.

60 The ban weakened student participation, reduced leadership opportunities, and eroded
61 democratic culture within universities. Although informal groups continued to
62 operate, they often fueled more conflict and instability. Today, many scholars and
63 activists argue that student unions should be revived under clear rules and
64 transparent supervision. Properly regulated unions could restore peaceful
65 participation, strengthen accountability, and prepare future leaders, making them vital
66 for Pakistan's democratic and academic development.

67 **Significance of the study**

68 This study is important because it explains why student unions were banned in
69 Pakistan and how that decision affected students, politics, and democracy in
70 universities. It shows both the problems and the benefits of unions, compares Pakistan
71 with other countries, and suggests ways to bring them back safely. The research helps
72 us understand how student unions can support youth leadership, participation, and a
73 stronger democratic culture.

74 **Objectives of the Study**

75 To study how student unions developed in Pakistan, the role they played in politics
76 and education, and the historical and political reasons behind their ban in 1984.

77 To analyze how the ban affected youth participation, leadership, and democratic
78 culture, and to explore possible policies for safely reviving student unions today.

79 **Research Questions**

- 80 1. Why were student unions banned in Pakistan, and what events led to it?
- 81 2. How did the ban affect students, their politics, and leadership in universities?

82 **Limitation of the study**

83 The study is limited by its focus on qualitative methods, relying mainly on interviews
84 and document analysis, which may not capture every perspective across Pakistan. It
85 does not include large-scale surveys or statistical data, so findings may reflect
86 selected views rather than the entire student population. Additionally, comparisons

87 with other countries are based on secondary sources, which may not fully match
88 Pakistan's unique context.

89 **Literature Review**

90 Student unions in Pakistan have historically been central to youth politics and
91 democratic participation. Early organizations like the Democratic Students Federation
92 (DSF) in the 1950s promoted free education and reforms but were banned due to their
93 leftist ideology (Shams, 2024). Later, groups such as the National Students Federation
94 (NSF) and Islami Jamiat-e-Talaba (IJT) became influential, reflecting ideological
95 diversity but also introducing divisions and conflicts (Ali, Rasheed, & Baig, 2023).

96 Scholars argue that unions played a decisive role in national movements, including
97 protests against Ayub Khan in 1968–69, which contributed to his downfall (Waris,
98 Kokab, & Alvi, 2023). However, by the late 1970s, increasing violence and political
99 interference changed public perception. Zia-ul-Haq's regime formally banned unions
100 in 1984 through the *Prohibition of Students' Unions Act*, citing unrest and fears of
101 radicalization (Behzad, 2010). Critics maintain that the ban was more about
102 consolidating authoritarian control than ensuring campus peace (JamiatPK, 2025).

103 Research shows the ban worsened campus conditions rather than improving them.
104 Violence and disorder increased after unions were prohibited, with student deaths and
105 clashes rising sharply in the post-ban era (JamiatPK, 2025). The absence of unions
106 also weakened leadership opportunities, reduced political awareness, and led to
107 informal groups that often caused more instability (Ali et al., 2023).

108 Globally, student unions are recognized as vital for civic engagement. In India, the
109 UK, and the US, unions operate under regulated frameworks, serving as nurseries for
110 future leaders and platforms for policy advocacy (Shams, 2024; Dhingra, 2024).
111 Comparative studies highlight that risks of violence can be managed through
112 oversight rather than outright bans, and unions can strengthen accountability and
113 democratic culture (Sulthana, 2025).

114 In a nutshell, the literature suggests that while unions in Pakistan faced challenges of
115 political misuse and conflict, their revival under transparent rules could restore

116 student participation, improve campus life, and prepare future leaders for democratic
117 governance.

118 **Theoretical Frame work and Research Methodology**

119 John Burton's Human Needs Theory argues that conflicts happen when people's basic
120 needs, such as security, identity, recognition, and participation, are denied (Burton,
121 1990). Unlike interests, which can be negotiated, these needs are non-negotiable and
122 must be met for peace and stability. In the context of Pakistan, student unions gave
123 young people recognition, representation, and a sense of belonging in their
124 universities. They allowed students to express concerns, participate in
125 decision-making, and feel secure in their role as active citizens (Ali, Rasheed, &Baig,
126 2023).

127 When the unions were banned in 1984, these needs were ignored. Students lost formal
128 platforms for identity and recognition, which led to frustration and the rise of informal
129 groups. Instead of reducing unrest, the ban created more tension and sometimes
130 violence, because unmet needs pushed students to seek alternative ways of expression
131 (Shams, 2024). Applying Burton's theory shows that the ban weakened democratic
132 culture by denying youth their basic political and social needs. For long-term peace
133 and empowerment, Pakistan must recognize that student unions are not just political
134 groups but essential spaces for meeting human needs of participation, recognition, and
135 security (Waris, Kokab, & Alvi, 2023).

136 Human Needs Theory is highly relevant to the study of student unions in Pakistan
137 because it explains why the ban created long-term problems. According to Burton
138 (1990), people cannot ignore basic needs like identity, recognition, and participation.
139 Student unions gave young people a sense of belonging, a platform to express their
140 views, and recognition as active members of society (Ali, Rasheed, &Baig, 2023).
141 When the unions were banned, these needs were denied, leading to frustration,
142 informal group activity, and sometimes violence (Shams, 2024).By applying this
143 theory, the study shows that the ban was not just a political decision but a denial of
144 essential human needs. It highlights that youth disengagement and campus conflicts
145 are linked to unmet needs for representation and participation. This makes Human

146 Needs Theory a useful lens for understanding both the past problems and the
147 importance of reviving unions under safe and regulated conditions.

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149 **Research Method**

150 This study uses documentary analysis as its main method because the topic is
151 historical and policy-driven. Documentary analysis means studying existing materials
152 such as government reports, university records, policy briefs, newspapers, and
153 academic articles. These sources provide evidence about the history of student unions,
154 their role in politics, and the reasons given for the ban in 1984 (Behzad, 2010).

155 The process involves collecting documents that directly relate to student unions in
156 Pakistan and then carefully reviewing them for credibility and relevance. Themes
157 such as the historical role of unions, state concerns about violence, and the impact of
158 the ban on democratic participation are identified and analyzed (Ali, Rasheed, & Baig,
159 2023). This helps the researcher build a clear picture of how unions shaped student
160 life and why they were restricted.

161 Documentary analysis is suitable because it allows the study to trace official
162 decisions, public debates, and scholarly discussions without relying only on
163 interviews. However, it also has limitations, since documents may reflect bias or leave
164 out student voices. Despite this, it provides a strong foundation for understanding the
165 broader political and social effects of the ban, especially when linked with Human
166 Needs Theory (Burton, 1990; Waris, Kokab, & Alvi, 2023).

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175 Data Analysis/ Results**176 Reasons of Ban of students Unions**

177 Documentary analysis shows that student unions were banned in 1984 during General
178 Zia-ul-Haq's regime through the Prohibition of Students' Unions Act. Official reasons
179 included rising campus violence, political interference, and fears of radicalization.
180 However, applying Human Needs Theory reveals that the ban was less about peace
181 and more about denying students recognition and participation, basic needs that
182 cannot be ignored (Burton, 1990). Historical records highlight that unions had become
183 politically influential, challenging state authority, especially during movements
184 against Ayub Khan in 1968–69 (Waris, Kokab, & Alvi, 2023). The ban was therefore
185 both a response to unrest and a strategy to weaken youth voices in national politics.

186 Ban effects on Students' Politics

187 The analysis of documents shows that the ban did not reduce violence; instead,
188 clashes and instability increased after unions were prohibited. Without formal
189 platforms, students formed informal groups that often caused more disorder. From the
190 perspective of Human Needs Theory, the ban denied students identity, recognition,
191 and participation, leading to frustration and alienation (Burton, 1990). Reports and
192 articles further reveal that the absence of unions weakened leadership opportunities,
193 reduced civic awareness, and silenced youth voices in democratic processes.
194 Comparative studies from India, the UK, and the US show that regulated unions
195 strengthen democracy and accountability, suggesting that Pakistan's ban harmed
196 rather than helped student development.

197 Findings/Results

198 The results highlight that banning unions ignored students' basic needs for
199 representation and belonging. Instead of creating peace, it produced frustration,
200 informal group activity, and weakened democratic culture in universities. The
201 evidence strongly supports the argument that reviving unions under clear rules would
202 meet these needs, reduce conflict, and prepare future leaders for democratic
203 governance in Pakistan.

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Conclusion and Recommendations

207 The findings show that the ban on student unions in Pakistan (1984) was introduced
208 as a state response to rising campus violence and political interference. Yet,
209 documentary analysis reveals that unions historically provided students with
210 platforms for leadership, civic awareness, and democratic participation. From the lens
211 of Human Needs Theory, the ban denied students essential needs of recognition,
212 identity, and participation. Instead of reducing unrest, the absence of unions created
213 frustration, informal groups, and weakened democratic culture in universities.

214 Generally, the results highlight that the ban ignored the non-negotiable needs of
215 students, producing instability rather than peace. Evidence from Pakistan and
216 comparative cases abroad shows that regulated unions can strengthen democracy,
217 accountability, and leadership development. Reviving unions under clear rules would
218 therefore not only meet students' needs but also contribute to healthier political
219 participation and conflict resolution in higher education.

Recommendations

221 It is recommended that student unions be revived under strict regulation to prevent
222 violence and political misuse. Universities should integrate civic education and
223 leadership training to ensure unions remain constructive platforms. Participation must
224 be inclusive, reflecting diversity and equality, while the government and Higher
225 Education Commission should provide policy support and monitoring mechanisms.
226 Learning from comparative models in India, the UK, and the US can further guide
227 Pakistan in building unions that strengthen democracy and accountability.

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