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RESEARCH ARTICLE

STUDENT UNIONS IN PAKISTAN: HISTORICAL BAN, BENEFITS, CHALLENGES, AND THEIR ROLE IN DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

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Abstract

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

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Introduction:-

Student unions in Pakistan have historically been important platforms for youth leadership and democratic engagement. Since independence in 1947, students went beyond academics to influence political thought, challenge colonial legacies, and participate in movements for democracy and social justice. Many future leaders, including Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Benazir Bhutto, began their political journeys through student activism. Over the decades, student politics shifted from constructive engagement in the 1950s–60s to turbulent times in the 1970s–80s, marked by ideological clashes, violence, and state crackdowns. Military regimes, political party interference, and the spread of weapons on campuses changed public perceptions, turning unions from centers of activism into areas of conflict. The ban on student unions in 1984 further reduced formal student participation, leaving informal groups to fill the gap. Today, the absence of recognized unions has weakened democratic culture in universities, limited leadership opportunities, and reduced youth political awareness. Globally, student unions are seen as vital for civic participation, accountability, and leadership training. With proper safeguards and transparent governance, Pakistan's student unions could once again serve as constructive platforms for dialogue, representation, and preparing future leaders.

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Background of the study:-

Student unions in Pakistan emerged after independence as small campus groups focused on academics and culture, but by the 1950s–70s they evolved into strong political forces. Organizations like the Democratic Students Federation and Islami Jamiat-e-Talaba became active, and students played a central role in protests against Ayub Khan and other governments. Over time, however, unions became associated with violence, rivalry, and interference from political parties, which shifted public perception and created pressure for restrictions. In 1984, under Zia-ul-Haq, the Prohibition of Students’ Unions Act formally banned all union activities, citing unrest and fears of radicalization. The ban weakened student participation, reduced leadership opportunities, and eroded democratic culture within universities. Although informal groups continued to operate, they often fueled more conflict and instability. Today, many scholars and activists argue that student unions should be revived under clear rules and transparent supervision. Properly regulated unions could restore peaceful participation, strengthen accountability, and prepare future leaders, making them vital for Pakistan’s democratic and academic development.

Significance of the study:-

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

Objectives of the Study:-

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

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

Research Questions:-

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

Limitation of the study:-

The study is limited by its focus on qualitative methods, relying mainly on interviews and document analysis, which may not capture every perspective across Pakistan. It does not include large-scale surveys or statistical data, so findings may reflect selected views rather than the entire student population. Additionally, comparisons with other countries are based on secondary sources, which may not fully match Pakistan’s unique context.

Literature Review:-

Student unions in Pakistan have historically been central to youth politics and democratic participation. Early organizations like the Democratic Students Federation (DSF) in the 1950s promoted free education and reforms but were banned due to their leftist ideology (Shams, 2024). Later, groups such as the National Students Federation (NSF) and Islami Jamiat-e-Talaba (IJT) became influential, reflecting ideological diversity but also introducing divisions and conflicts (Ali, Rasheed, & Baig, 2023). Scholars argue that unions played a decisive role in national movements, including protests against Ayub Khan in 1968–69, which contributed to his downfall (Waris, Kokab, & Alvi, 2023). However, by the late 1970s, increasing violence and political interference changed public perception. Zia-ul-Haq’s regime formally banned unions in 1984 through the Prohibition of Students’ Unions Act, citing unrest and fears of radicalization (Behzad, 2010). Critics maintain that the ban was more about consolidating authoritarian control than ensuring campus peace (JamiatPK, 2025).

Research shows the ban worsened campus conditions rather than improving them. Violence and disorder increased after unions were prohibited, with student deaths and clashes rising sharply in the post-ban era (JamiatPK, 2025). The absence of unions also weakened leadership opportunities, reduced political awareness, and led to informal groups that often caused more instability (Ali et al., 2023). Globally, student unions are recognized as vital for civic engagement. In India, the UK, and the US, unions operate under regulated frameworks, serving as nurseries for future leaders and platforms for policy advocacy (Shams, 2024; Dhingra, 2024). Comparative studies highlight that risks of violence can be managed through oversight rather than outright bans, and unions can strengthen accountability and democratic culture (Sulthana, 2025). In a nutshell, the literature suggests that while unions in

Pakistan faced challenges of political misuse and conflict, their revival under transparent rules could restore student participation, improve campus life, and prepare future leaders for democratic governance.

Theoretical Frame work and Research Methodology:-

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

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

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

Research Method:-

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

The process involves collecting documents that directly relate to student unions in Pakistan and then carefully reviewing them for credibility and relevance. Themes such as the historical role of unions, state concerns about violence, and the impact of the ban on democratic participation are identified and analyzed (Ali, Rasheed, & Baig, 2023). This helps the researcher build a clear picture of how unions shaped student life and why they were restricted. Documentary analysis is suitable because it allows the study to trace official decisions, public debates, and scholarly discussions without relying only on interviews. However, it also has limitations, since documents may reflect bias or leave out student voices. Despite this, it provides a strong foundation for understanding the broader political and social effects of the ban, especially when linked with Human Needs Theory (Burton, 1990; Waris, Kokab, & Alvi, 2023).

Data Analysis/ Results:-

Reasons of Ban of students Unions:-

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

Ban effects on Students’ Politics:-

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

Findings/Results:-

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

Conclusion and Recommendations:-

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

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

Recommendations:-

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

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