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POLICY BRIEF

REVIVING THE ROLE OF YOUTH IN PAKISTAN'S SOCIAL AND POLITICAL LIFE



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Introduction

Young people in Pakistan are politically and socially active. At different stages of their lives and through different channels, they participate in political and social spheres as voters, campaigners, political workers, student organizers, digital communicators, volunteers and members of social movements. Their presence has been visible in the electoral mobilization generated by the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI); in rights-based movements such as the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM), Baloch Yakjehti Committee (BYC) and Joint Awami Action Committee (JAAC) in Azad Jammu and Kashmir; and in campaigns concerning gender equality, climate change, digital freedoms, access to information, education and public services. Students and other young citizens also regularly express solidarity with communities facing rights violations, conflict and political instability.

However, these different forms of participation seldom accumulate into sustained political influence or a youth-led sustained social or political movement like the ones other South Asian nations have experienced of late. Some scholars argue that young Pakistanis are gradually withdrawing from formal politics because of mistrust in political institutions, corruption and unfulfilled promises, dynastic and elite control, unstable governance, weak civic education, unemployment and other socioeconomic pressures (Asif et al., 2026)¹. While institutional barriers may indeed be driving some young people away from formal politics, they are not entirely disillusioned with the political and electoral system.

An Ipsos survey conducted immediately before the 2024 general election found that Pakistani youth were dissatisfied and weakly involved in routine political activity, yet remained electorally engaged as 88 per cent considered voting important and 70 percent intended to vote (Ipsos, 2024)². Despite controversies surrounding the 2024 elections and the country's persistent economic crises, young people retain hope for their future. According to a 2026 global survey by the Worldwide Independent Network of Market Research (WIN) and Gallup, 65 per cent of Pakistani youth were hopeful about their future, compared with a global average of 63 per cent. Yet this optimism coexisted with insecurity as 44 per cent would consider migrating, while 26 per cent believed their generation had fewer opportunities than their parents (Gallup, 2026)³.

This apparently conflicting evidence points to a problem of continuity in youth mobilization and participation in politics and public life. Mobilization may rise around an election, arrest, examination controversy, rights violation, environmental disaster or political crisis, only to weaken once the immediate moment or frustration has passed. The relationships, experience and leadership developed during one episode are rarely retained by institutions capable of carrying them into the next. Youth's energy, therefore, remains dispersed across parties, campuses, movements, professions, regions and causes, with few trusted arrangements through which separate groups can cooperate.

Rather than demonstrating indifference or apathy, episodic mobilization points to the weakening of the political and social infrastructure through which earlier generations entered public life. Youth mobilization during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s contributed to struggles against military rule and for democracy, constitutionalism and human rights. Political parties, student and trade unions, social movements, educational institutions, cultural groups, newspapers, professional associations and study circles helped young people interpret grievances, connect with others, develop leadership and move from protest towards negotiation and institutional influence. Many of these institutions have since weakened, lost their representative character or become inaccessible to young people. The contrast with much of the twentieth century is important. Communism, socialism, social democracy, anti-colonial nationalism and Islamic revivalism offered young people explanations of injustice and visions of a fundamentally different

¹ <https://ojs.plhr.org.pk/journal/article/view/1349/1216>

² <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2024-02/Ipsos%20Report%20on%20political%20landscape%20of%20Pakistani%20youth-%20Released%20by%20VOA-1Feb2024.pdf>

³ <https://gallup.com.pk/wp/wp-content/uploads/2026/08/Worldviews-Survey-Youth-Day.pdf>

social and political order (Farid et al., 2024)⁴. Their appeal was sustained by parties, unions, student organizations, religious movements, cultural groups and publications that carried.

This raises an important comparative question. Young people in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal have recently transformed specific grievances into nationwide mobilizations of so-called generation Z (Bajpae, 2026)⁵, while India continues to witness organized youth activism through student bodies, political networks and established protest spaces. Pakistani youth experience similar economic insecurity, political frustration and digital connectivity, yet their mobilizations generally remain divided by party, region, institution or cause. Why has comparable access to technology and social media not produced a similar convergence in Pakistan?

The answer may lie less in access to technology than in the structures through which technology becomes collective power. Social media can spread information, amplify anger and bring people into temporary contact, but it cannot by itself build trust, develop leadership, protect participants, negotiate differences or preserve institutional memory. Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and India retain different combinations of student organizations, political groups, civil-society networks and recognized spaces for collective action. Pakistan has progressively weakened many of these structures. The question is how the democratic infrastructure can be rebuilt to connect, protect and sustain the participation already present among Pakistani youth.

Democratic infrastructure is vital for sustainable youth action

Youth participation becomes politically consequential when it is supported by institutions that connect individual concerns, organize collective interests and provide continuity beyond a particular event. This supporting structure may be understood as democratic infrastructure, an ecosystem of the organizations, relationships, knowledge, rules and protections through which citizens act together and engage public authority.

Its formal components include political parties, student unions, local governments, courts and legislatures. Political parties aggregate interests and connect them with electoral competition and government. Student unions organize representation within educational institutions and provide an early route into public leadership. Local governments bring political participation closer to everyday questions of services and community life. Courts and legislatures provide channels through which collective demands can acquire legal and institutional expression.

These institutions matter not merely because they exist but because they connect different stages of political action. A shared grievance must be interpreted, converted into a demand, represented by people with a mandate and directed towards an institution capable of responding. Where these connections are weak, voting, protest and digital expression remain separate activities and produce little organizational continuity.

Democratic infrastructure also operates outside formal institutions. Reading circles, campus societies, neighbourhood groups, professional networks, independent media, legal collectives, community campaigns and digital networks help people exchange information, develop a common understanding and coordinate action. These informal spaces are particularly important where formal institutions are inaccessible, unrepresentative or subject to state control.

In earlier periods, several of these functions were concentrated within political parties, student organizations, trade unions and ideological movements. They interpreted events, conducted political education, recruited members, developed leadership and carried experience from one campaign to another.

⁴ <https://www.gsrjournal.com/article/islamic-socialism-and-communist-socialism-a-review-of-comparative-analytical-studies>

⁵ <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2026/06/south-asias-gen-z-revolutions-now-face-difficult-realities>

How does existing democratic infrastructure in Pakistan look like for young people

Institution or space	Organizational presence	Digital presence	Legal and administrative space	Social legitimacy	Youth inclusion	Response to active youth
Political parties	Nationwide but often personality-centred, electoral and weak between elections	Highly visible but reactive; spokespersons often substitute for institutional positions	Legally recognized, although scrutiny and restrictions vary	Considerable but polarized	Mainly through youth wings, campaigns and selected young candidates	Welcoming when activity supports party leadership
Legislatures	Constitutionally established but distant from everyday youth participation	Proceedings and members are visible online, but meaningful digital engagement is limited	Strong constitutional mandate	Important but weakened by polarization and limited public confidence	Young people may vote, petition committees and contest subject to age requirements, but have few channels of representation	Generally receptive symbolically, but rarely shares agenda-setting authority
Local governments	Uneven, frequently interrupted and institutionally weak	Limited and varies considerably between areas	Constitutionally recognized but dependent on provincial laws, elections and devolution	Potentially high because of proximity to communities	Quotas for young are there, but meaningful opportunities remain irregular	Potentially receptive, but constrained by limited powers, resources and continuity
Courts and legal institutions	Nationwide but unevenly accessible	Growing online access to judgments and case information, with limited participatory engagement	Strong constitutional and legal mandate	Considerable, though affected by cost, delay and recent curtailing of judicial powers	Young people can pursue rights through litigation and legal advocacy, but financial, procedural and geographic barriers are substantial	Protective in some rights cases, but access is reactive, expensive and uncertain
Ideological groups	Organized but generally limited in reach and influence	Limited and uneven	Often operate as informal or unregistered associations	Confined largely to sympathetic quarters	Youth are often central to recruitment and organization	Generally encouraging
Student unions	Elected unions remain non-functional	Absent since 1984	Legally inconsistent: recognized in Sindh but largely unimplemented; restricted or uncertain elsewhere	Weak after decades of absence	Some weak voices among youth for restoration	Students' unions are all about youth

Informal student organizations	Present on many campuses but fragmented, insecure and operating as a wing of a political or religious party or a group	Active but uneven	Operate in a grey area	Limited and sometimes associated with disruption or party conflict	Youth-led by definition	Thrive on inter-group conflicts
Trade unions	Legally established but declining	Minimal	Recognized but constrained by weak enforcement and labour informality	Limited outside organized economy sectors	Young and informal workers are poorly represented	Mostly indifferent
Educational institutions	Extensive nationwide institutional reach	Strong for administration and instruction, weak for civic engagement	Fully recognized but able to restrict political activity on campus	High as providers of qualifications	Students are included academically, rarely in governance	Frequently discouraging towards political organization
Study circles	Small, informal and scattered	Limited but adaptable	Generally unrestricted unless linked to contentious politics	Limited	Usually youth-friendly	Supportive
Online learning and discussion groups	Fluid and rarely institutionalized	Their principal area of activity	Broadly accessible but vulnerable to platform controls and digital restrictions	Uneven	Open and often youth-led	Neutral to supportive
Civil-society groups	Established but concentrated in major cities and often dependent on short-term projects	Moderate to strong, especially around campaigns	Legally recognized but subject to increasing registration, funding and administrative controls	Uneven; respected in some constituencies but portrayed as externally driven in others	Engage youth mainly as staff, volunteers, trainees or beneficiaries rather than members with governing authority	Supportive, but usually within project mandates
Media entities	Extensive but commercially concentrated and under political and financial pressure	Strong, though increasingly fragmented across platforms	Legally recognized but exposed to regulation, censorship and economic pressure	Significant but declining and politically polarized	Employ young journalists and content producers but provide limited editorial authority or institutional protection	Welcoming of visibility, less reliable in protecting sustained critical activity

Pakistan possesses most of the formal and informal components of democratic infrastructure, but few provide reliable routes from youth participation to public influence. Legislatures remain distant and offer young people little agenda-setting authority, while repeatedly interrupted and weakly empowered local

governments deny them the most accessible route into representative politics. Courts can protect rights, but usually only after a violation has occurred, and litigation remains costly, slow and unevenly accessible.

Political parties mobilize young people without giving them meaningful authority; educational institutions teach them but rarely include them in governance; and trade unions represent only a small share of the youth workforce. Civil-society and media organizations create opportunities for advocacy, learning, employment and visibility, but project cycles, commercial pressures and weak institutional protection limit continuity. Elected student unions remain largely nonfunctional, while informal student bodies, study circles and digital groups lack legal certainty, resources and access to decision-making.

Pakistan's democratic infrastructure is therefore not absent; it is fragmented, conditional and weakly connected. It is better equipped to mobilize young people for elections, campaigns and moments of crisis than to develop their leadership, represent their interests and sustain their collective influence between such moments.

Young people are already participating

Despite all odds, young people have been increasingly visible in Pakistan's elections, political campaigns, digital debates, rights movements and community initiatives. Their participation is uneven and takes different forms across class, gender, geography and education, but it is substantial enough to rule out apathy as the main explanation for their limited collective influence.

The general elections of 2013, 2018 and 2024 demonstrated a sustained and demonstrably growing interest among younger voters. Young people participated not only as voters but also as campaign volunteers, polling agents, digital communicators and local political workers. They organized public meetings, circulated party messages, documented electoral events and mobilized families and neighbourhood networks. For many, elections provided the most accessible and sometimes the only recognized route into political activity.

PTI played the most significant role in expanding this participation. It attracted younger and first-time voters, used digital communication more effectively than established parties and gave political expression to frustration with corruption, dynastic leadership and conventional electoral arrangements. Its campaigns allowed many young people with no previous connection to party structures to enter political debate, contribute financially, attend public meetings and undertake campaign work. The political conditions following May 2023 events prevented this mobilisation from developing normally. Arrests, restrictions on assembly and communication, pressure on candidates and disruption of party organization narrowed the space in which supporters could organize.

Youth participation is also visible outside electoral parties. PTM mobilized a generation around security policies, enforced disappearances, landmines, dignity and constitutional rights. BYC brought young people, particularly young women, into public action around disappearances, political exclusion and control over resources. The JAAC in Azad Jammu and Kashmir drew young people into campaigns around electricity, economic pressures, governance and representation. These movements developed because conventional parties and representative institutions were not adequately carrying the grievances from which they emerged.

Other forms of participation are less visible but equally relevant. Student solidarity marches and campus campaigns have raised questions of fees, harassment, academic freedom and restoration of student representation. Women's rights movements have created space for younger women to question violence, discrimination and control over their public and private lives. Climate and environmental initiatives have connected youth action with air pollution, water, urban development, energy and ecological survival.

Right to Information (RTI) activists, election observers and digital-rights groups have engaged public institutions through information requests, monitoring, documentation and legal advocacy. During floods, earthquakes and other emergencies, young volunteers have organized relief, fundraising and community

support, often through informal and digitally coordinated networks. Neighbourhood initiatives around public services, education and local environmental problems provide further evidence of participation below the level of national politics.

These activities do not form a single youth movement, nor do they necessarily share an ideology. Some are partisan, some regional, some rights-based and others temporary responses to immediate problems. Their significance lies in showing that political and civic energy is present across Pakistani society.

The immediate barriers facing youth collectives

The different forms of youth participation in Pakistan rarely combine into a wider field of collective action. Electoral workers, student groups, rights movements, professional networks, community initiatives and digital campaigns generally operate within separate political and social settings. They may experience similar restrictions and institutional failures, but they have few trusted mechanisms through which to share knowledge, coordinate action or defend one another.

Coordination without forced unity

Youth participation is divided across parties, movements, campuses, professions, regions and causes. Diversity is not itself a weakness: different groups arise from different experiences and have valid reasons to retain autonomy. The difficulty is the absence of trusted arrangements through which they can cooperate on common democratic conditions, share knowledge or defend one another without surrendering their identities.

Polarization makes even this limited cooperation difficult. Rights are frequently defended according to the identity of the person or party affected. Each political camp may support restrictions against its opponents and object only when the same methods are applied to itself. Social-media algorithms deepen this separation by rewarding accusation and certainty while penalizing qualification and dialogue.

A high threshold of fear

Arrest, surveillance, disciplinary action, pressure on families, online harassment, violence, legal proceedings and political labelling shape participation before a protest begins. The decision to become visible may threaten education, employment, mobility, family support or physical safety. This is not a shortage of courage; it is a structural threshold that isolated individuals and small collectives cannot be expected to cross repeatedly.

Protection is usually reactive. Lawyers, journalists and political figures intervene after an arrest or a major confrontation, but standing relationships are uncommon and public attention fades quickly. A collective that cannot anticipate legal, medical, media and family support, remains vulnerable even when its cause attracts sympathy.

Leadership without succession

Many mobilizations depend on a few visible organizers. Visibility can attract members and public attention, but it also makes a movement easier to disrupt through arrest, intimidation, co-option or reputational attack. Groups without second-line leadership, shared records, internal rules and procedures for disagreement struggle to survive leadership turnover or repression.

Digital media can intensify this problem by attaching a campaign to the person controlling its most visible account. The rapid emergence of leadership is an opportunity only when responsibility, access and knowledge are distributed rather than concentrated.

Unequal freedom to participate

Young people do not enter public life with equal time, mobility, financial security or social permission. Class, gender, disability, location, employment and family circumstances determine who can remain

visible. Young women often face restrictions from both public institutions and private households. Working youth may be unable to attend actions organized around campus schedules, while persons with disabilities face physical and communication barriers rarely considered by organizers.

The commercialization of education makes this inequality more severe. Pakistan had 160 public and 111 private higher education institutions in 2025, making private institutions about 41 per cent of the total (HEC, 2025)⁶. Public universities have also moved towards a fee-dependent model. HEC officials informed a Senate committee in 2021 that HEC provided around 32 percent of public-university funding, provincial governments eight per cent and universities generated the remaining 60 per cent themselves (Senate of Pakistan, 2021)⁷. Internally generated income is not limited to tuition, but this structure encourages self-finance programmes, additional charges and repeated fee increases.

Students and their families must arrange fees, transport, accommodation and digital access every semester, often through work, family borrowing, informal loans or the sale of assets. Pakistan does not have a well-documented Western-style student-debt system; its educational debt is often carried invisibly by households. Suspension, delayed graduation, loss of assistance or a disciplinary case can place years of family investment at risk.

The semester system further organizes student time around attendance, assessment and the next payment. Students are treated as customers when fees are collected but rarely as institutional members when budgets, rules and disciplinary systems are decided. Apparent political caution among less secure students should therefore not be read as indifference. For many, participation has become materially and institutionally unaffordable.

These barriers reinforce one another. Fragmentation reduces protection; polarization prevents solidarity; unequal risk narrows participation; and leader dependence makes repression more effective. The result is not the absence of mobilisation but its repeated interruption.

How Pakistan's democratic infrastructure weakened

Pakistan's present condition was produced gradually. Military governments interrupted electoral and constitutional processes, but their deeper effect was on organizations below the state. Parties, student bodies, trade unions, professional associations, local governments and independent media were repeatedly regulated, divided, co-opted or treated as security concerns. Civilian periods restored some political space without consistently rebuilding the organizations damaged during authoritarian rule.

Parties retained elections but lost organization

The non-party elections of 1985 accelerated constituency politics based on wealth, family influence, patronage and access to administration. Later party governments absorbed much of this model. Electables acquired parties near elections, while parties acquired candidates able to finance campaigns and manage local patronage.

Permanent membership, local branches, manifestos, study circles and advancement through political work lost importance. Ordinary workers could mobilize voters and defend leaders but had little influence over policy, internal elections or candidate selection. Youth wings often remained active, but largely as campaign and rally structures rather than places of independent deliberation and leadership development.

Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) retains a more structured membership and political-education tradition, while the Awami National Party (ANP) preserves organizational continuity in parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Their

⁶ <https://www.hec.gov.pk/english/news/news/Pages/Secretary-Education.aspx>

⁷ <https://senate.gov.pk/com/pressreleasedetail.php?id=MjY3&pressid=NDA4Mg%3D%3D>

experience shows that organized political work remains possible, but their ideological, electoral and regional limits prevent them from substituting for a wider institutional party system.

Campuses lost representation and became degree markets

The prohibition of student unions in 1984 removed an institution through which generations could learn elections, representation, negotiation and accountability. Student politics continued through party-linked groups, societies and temporary campaigns, but the wider student body lost a recognized structure through which it could authorize representatives and hold them accountable.

Universities permitted cultural, literary, welfare and professional activities while largely excluding students from decisions about fees, budgets, discipline, academic policy, accommodation and services. Commercialization deepened the imbalance. Both private and public institutions increasingly treated students as purchasers of credentials rather than members of an academic community. Universities could teach citizenship while denying students a voice in the institutions they inhabited and financed.

Local government never became a stable political entry point

Local government should offer the most accessible route into politics because it places participation within neighbourhoods, villages and towns. Instead, systems were repeatedly introduced, redesigned, delayed or dissolved. Military governments used local bodies to build legitimacy without strengthening representative institutions above them; elected provincial governments often treated them as competitors for authority and resources.

The 18th Amendment strengthened provincial autonomy but did not produce comparable devolution below the province. Provincial control over laws, elections, administration and fiscal transfers prevented local institutions from developing stable rules, public trust and a continuing route through which younger leaders could emerge.

Civil society created participation without durable membership

Civil-society organizations opened important space around human rights, gender equality, accountability, peacebuilding, climate and community development. Yet young people were commonly engaged as trainees, volunteers, interns or beneficiaries through projects of limited duration. Training cohorts dispersed, networks became inactive and forums disappeared when funding ended.

This model produced informed individuals but relatively few organizations they could own and govern. The problem was not only short funding cycles. Participation was frequently separated from representation: young people were invited to speak and volunteer but less often to set priorities, elect leadership or preserve the organization after the project.

Accountability openings remained unreliable

Right To Information (RTI) laws, grievance mechanisms, election observation and consultation requirements created routes into public institutions outside party politics. They were particularly suitable for young citizens able to use research, law and digital communication. But information commissions faced vacancies and weak resources, public bodies resisted disclosure, consultations were frequently conducted after decisions had been made, and grievance systems offered uncertain remedies.

An accountability right that depends on exceptional persistence cannot perform an everyday democratic function. The openings remain valuable, but most youth groups lack the legal and organizational support required to use them consistently.

Digital reach grew while protection contracted

Digital platforms reduced the cost of communication, fundraising, documentation and coordination. At the same time, shutdowns, blocking, surveillance, restrictive regulation and legal uncertainty made digital

participation vulnerable. Commercial platforms fragmented political learning and rewarded spectacle, while dependence on a few accounts reproduced personalized leadership.

Technology did not cause the decline of organization. It entered a field in which parties, unions, campuses and local bodies had already weakened. Its reach can compensate for distance, but it cannot by itself provide membership rights, institutional memory or protection from coercion.

Political knowledge stopped travelling reliably between generations

The cumulative effect is a decline in intergenerational democratic transmission. Constitutional government, pluralism, equality, nonviolence and solidarity do not pass automatically from one generation to the next. They survive when people discuss them, practise them and attach them to organizations and public struggles.

Parties, student unions, labour organizations, study circles, newspapers, professional associations and cultural groups once performed parts of this function. Their politics was not always democratic or inclusive, but they connected younger participants with political history, experienced leadership and organizational practice. As these institutions weakened, each generation became more likely to encounter politics as an immediate crisis rather than an accumulated body of knowledge.

Commercial and segmented education did not fill the gap. It concentrated on credentials, examinations and employment while providing limited understanding of constitutional rights, political institutions or the history of social struggle. Print and broadcasting lost their earlier gatekeeping power, and digital media divided public learning into competing streams. The result is a generation with considerable information and technological ability but uneven access to the knowledge and relationships required to convert them into collective strategy.

What Jantar Mantar demonstrates

The 2026 youth mobilisation at Jantar Mantar (an astronomical observatory), India is useful for Pakistan not because India provides unrestricted democratic space. Protesters faced blocked accounts, threats, disciplinary warnings, restrictions on assembly, arrests, police action and repeated mobile-internet suspensions. Its significance lies in the organizational, legal and social capacity that allowed the mobilisation to continue under pressure.

The Cockroach Janta Party began as an online satire responding to unemployment, examination failures and the public humiliation of young people. Examination leaks converted this wider anger into a specific issue. Social media provided speed and scale, but the movement acquired political force only when a recognizable identity was joined with leadership, demands, physical presence and sustained organization.

New leadership carried earlier experience

Abhijeet Dipke had studied journalism and political communication and worked with the Aam Aadmi Party's social-media team (Agarwala, 2026)⁸. Saurav Das brought experience of investigative journalism, RTI and public-accountability work. Other organizers came from political research, environmental action, student representation and earlier campaigns concerning examinations and education.

The speed of mobilisation therefore concealed a slower accumulation of skills. Someone had to frame the grievance, communicate across regions, deal with the media, negotiate with authorities, manage disagreement and maintain a peaceful public position under pressure. The leadership was new; the experience on which it drew was not.

⁸ [How Abhijeet Dipke became the face of India's first Gen Z protest movement, and won | Reuters](#)

Student organizations supplied networks and continuity:

All India Students' Association (AISA), All India Students' Federation (AISF), Students' Federation of India (SFI) and other student actors joined the mobilisation, organized solidarity in other cities and supported protesters facing detention and legal action. They brought members, campus contacts, leadership structures and experience of collective action. They did not have to originate or control the movement to strengthen it.

Pakistan's campus politics lacks an equivalent representative base. Student groups exist, but the absence of elected unions leaves few legitimate structures through which solidarity can spread across institutions or through which the wider student body can authorize collective action.

Protection came from several parts of society:

Lawyers supported detainees and challenged restrictions; journalists documented events; public figures widened legitimacy; volunteers supplied food and materials; and opposition parliamentarians connected the protest with formal politics. These actors did not remove repression, but they increased its legal and political cost and prevented young protesters from being treated as an isolated crowd.

The comparison is important. Youth collectives cannot cross a high threshold of coercion through bravery alone. Their ability to persist depends partly on whether lawyers, academics, journalists, political workers, families, professional bodies and established movements are prepared to defend their right to peaceful action without taking control of the movement.

Technology amplified an organization that also existed offline:

Memes, short videos, petitions and volunteer registration allowed the movement to grow rapidly across regions. When mobile internet was suspended around Jantar Mantar, some protesters used BitChat and other Bluetooth-based mesh applications that allowed nearby phones to exchange and relay messages without mobile data or a central server.

This did not make physical organization unnecessary. Volunteers still maintained the protest site, student groups mobilized supporters, lawyers responded to detention and political actors negotiated. Technology reduced time and cost and made communication more resilient because it was connected with people and relationships on the ground.

Democratic ideas had been kept alive:

Young protesters invoked [Ambedkar](#), [Bhagat Singh](#), constitutionalism, secularism, equality and nonviolence despite decades of majoritarian politics. These ideas did not reappear spontaneously. Student organizations, teachers, activists, political workers, journalists, lawyers and intellectuals had continued to transmit them even when their institutional position weakened.

The central lesson is not that Indian youth are inherently more political than Pakistani youth. It is that a digitally triggered mobilisation can become sustained action when it encounters experienced leadership, student networks, legal protection, social legitimacy, adaptable technology and a democratic vocabulary preserved across generations.

A pathway for revival

Revival cannot be delivered as a government youth programme, reduced to another cycle of training workshops or made dependent on a charismatic leader. Young people must remain the principal actors in their own organization. Other democratic actors can help make that organization more knowledgeable, representative, durable and difficult to isolate.

Connect what already exists:

The starting point is not necessarily a new national platform. Pakistan already has student campaigns, political workers, rights movements, community organizations, RTI activists, professional groups and digital networks.

Working relationships can begin around limited purposes such as sharing verified information, preserving campaign records, providing legal support, coordinating solidarity and defending common democratic rules. Cooperation should not require groups to surrender their identities or accept one political line. Larger parties and well-known activists must not use coordination to dominate smaller or affected communities.

Turn everyday concerns into public questions:

Education costs, unemployment, examinations, harassment, transport and public services are already political entry points. A fee increase concerns public financing, university budgets and student representation. Examination failure concerns equality of opportunity and trust in public recruitment. Unemployment concerns economic policy, patronage, labour protection and unequal access, not only individual skills.

Organization becomes meaningful when it connects immediate experience with the institution responsible for it, while retaining demands that people can understand and pursue. Not every grievance needs to become an ideological declaration but it does need to identify power, representation and accountability.

Rebuild political learning across generations:

Political workers understand constituencies, elections, government departments, negotiation, patronage and the gap between a public promise and an enforceable decision. This knowledge should not remain dormant between elections. It can be shared through study groups, constituency work, campaign records and reflection on earlier movements.

Transfer must run in both directions. Younger participants may better understand digital organization, changing employment, gender relations, climate anxiety and overlapping identities. They should be able to question the compromises, hierarchy and exclusion reproduced by older political actors.

Make parties routes to leadership, not only electoral vehicles:

The test of a party's commitment to youth is not the number of young people at its rallies. It is whether younger members can join through clear procedures, participate in local decisions, contest internal positions, shape policy and influence candidate selection without family connection, wealth or proximity to a senior leader.

Young party workers need room to deliberate and disagree, including with their own leadership. Cross-party youth cooperation can begin with a modest agreement that fair elections, peaceful assembly, due process, student representation and functioning local government must protect every party and movement. Democratic safeguards have little meaning when defended only for allies.

Parties and social movements also need a relationship that does not end in dismissal or capture. Movements bring neglected concerns and new community leadership into public life; parties can carry legitimate demands into legislatures and budgets.

Democratize educational life:

Teachers and academics can help students connect unemployment, inequality, climate stress and exclusion with the organization of the state and economy. Their role is to provide history, evidence and competing explanations, not to recruit students into a preferred ideology.

Educational institutions cannot credibly teach citizenship while excluding students from decisions about fees, services, discipline, harassment and academic life. Representation must extend beyond permission to hold debates or cultural events. Students financing and inhabiting an institution require a recognized voice in how it is governed.

Academics who mentor debate or defend peaceful participation also need support from faculty associations and professional networks. Individual teachers cannot sustain democratic space while remaining isolated before university administrations or political pressure.

Replace project participation with youth ownership:

Civil society can provide research, meeting spaces, small transparent support, documentation and connections across regions. Its contribution becomes meaningful when young people set priorities, own records and relationships, choose leadership and continue after funding ends.

Independent groups may take positions that are less polished or more politically uncomfortable than donor programmes permit. Support should help them remain democratic, informed and nonviolent without removing their autonomy or turning them into project beneficiaries.

Build protection before a crisis:

Journalists should report youth concerns before they become confrontations and connect similar struggles across campuses, communities and regions. Young people should be treated as political actors rather than as a demographic category, online trend or public-order problem.

Lawyers and bar associations can provide standing guidance on assembly, association, digital expression, university discipline, arrest and police powers. Named contacts, documentation procedures and links with families should exist before an action begins. Preventive support cannot remove risk, but it changes the position of a participant who would otherwise face the state or an institution alone.

Families, artists, professional bodies and respected public figures also determine whether young activists retain social legitimacy. Their support is particularly important for women, religious minorities, transgender persons, persons with disabilities and participants dependent on family income. Coercion becomes more effective when public pressure is reinforced inside the household or profession.

Reconnect youth politics with work and locality:

Youth participation must not be reduced to university students and urban professionals. Trade unions, farmer organizations, professional associations and informal-worker networks need to create decision-making space for younger members whose concerns arise from insecure work, wages, safety, migration and exclusion from social protection.

Neighbourhood and community organization provides an entry point between episodic protest and distant national politics. Young people can document municipal services, examine budgets, use RTI laws and organize residents around local decisions. Local institutions are often weak and captured, but such work develops practical knowledge of administration, resources and representation and can produce leadership rooted in public service rather than online visibility.

Use technology to reduce distance and distribute leadership:

Technology-based mobilisation can connect dispersed youth, lower the time and cost of participation, extend organization beyond major cities and campuses, raise small contributions and coordinate rapid responses. Public-data repositories, RTI trackers, secure membership systems, transparent crowdfunding and legal-support directories can turn digital reach into practical infrastructure.

Respond to political events through consistent principles:

Arrests, examination scandals, attacks on minorities, enforced disappearances, election restrictions, environmental disasters and internet shutdowns demand rapid responses. Speed should not replace verification or consultation. Youth groups need to establish what happened, listen to those directly affected, understand the legal context, identify achievable demands and continue documentation after public attention declines.

Students should be able to express informed and peaceful solidarity with communities facing rights violations, conflict or instability. Such solidarity can break the isolation through which coercion is sustained. It must not appropriate another community's experience: affected people should retain authority over their demands and representation.

Reform must be won rather than awaited:

Government should restore elected student unions with democratic and nonviolent safeguards; protect peaceful assembly, association and digital access; hold regular local-government elections with meaningful powers and finances; strengthen RTI and grievance institutions; and include students in education governance. It should reverse the commercialization of public education and make university budgets, fees and disciplinary systems transparent.

These measures should not be presented as requests dependent on government goodwill. Government reform is an objective of revival, not its precondition. Young people and their allies must build enough organization, public legitimacy and cross-sector protection to make exclusion politically costly. Wider society's role is not to wait for the state to create an enabling environment. It is to help organized youth enlarge civic space until institutions are compelled to recognize it.

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About Accountability Lab Pakistan

Accountability Lab Pakistan (ALP) is an Islamabad-based local think-and-do tank focused on making governance work for people by supporting active citizens, responsible leaders, and accountable institutions. Our approach reimagines how accountability can be built and sustained, envisioning a governance ecosystem where resources are used effectively, decision-making is inclusive and evidence-based, and public institutions respond to citizen needs.

Distinct from traditional approaches, ALP positions accountability as a cross-cutting value embedded across governance systems. This includes work spanning public sector reform, civic engagement, human rights, service delivery, and institutional strengthening. Through knowledge production, leadership development, innovation and institutional reforms, ALP contributes to shaping more transparent, responsive, and resilient governance structures.

ALP's work is anchored in strengthening the relationship between citizens and the state by advancing institutional effectiveness, public trust, and inclusive governance. By integrating research, practice, and coalition-building, the Lab supports reform processes and contributes to a more accountable and responsive governance ecosystem in Pakistan.