

REPORT

YOUTH AND THE SOCIAL CONTRACT IN PAKISTAN

A SUMMARY OF THE MAIN INSIGHTS EMERGING FROM THE

TESTING IN PAKISTAN OF A SOCIAL CONTRACT ANALYTICAL

FRAMEWORK FOR THE YOUTH

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“Development of a Social Contract Analytical Framework, followed by Pilot Study in Pakistan”

Contents

1. Introduction: Why focus on Pakistan’s youth?	3
2. Methodology	4
3. Fundamental components of Pakistan’s social contract	6
3.1 The political-historical context.....	6
3.2 Social stratification.....	7
3.3 The political marketplace.....	7
4.1 Specific characteristics of Pakistan's social contract	8
4.1 State-society relations.....	8
4.2 Youth participation and representation	8
4.3 State capacity	12
4.4 State-society relations.....	16
4.5 The political system	16
4.6 Economic opportunities.....	18
4.7 Protection and security	18
4.8 Freedom of expression.....	19
4.9 Youth interaction with society.....	19
4.10 External actors	20
4.11 Key demographic trends.....	20
5. Current youth concerns and expectations	22
5.1 Youth participation and representation	22
6. Conclusions and recommendations	24
Annex 1: Roundtable discussion participants	26
Annex 2: Resource persons interviewed for this report.....	27

1. Introduction: Why focus on Pakistan's youth?

Pakistan's population grew rapidly during the last seven decades. While in 1950 it was ranked 14th in the list of most populous countries in the world, with 38 million inhabitants, by 2017 it had climbed to 6th position, with a total population of 197 million.¹

According to the latest estimates, “more than half of the projected increase in global population up to 2050 will be concentrated in just eight countries”, with Pakistan being one of them.²

Pakistan has one of the largest youth bulges in the world. In 2019, of a total population of more than 216 million, 118.2 million (54.6 per cent) were below the age of 24.³ The population is expected to continue to grow until the end of the century. Under pressure from a growing population, and especially worried about employment opportunities for its youth, Pakistan has resorted to outward labour migration as a convenient way to partially release this pressure on the domestic social system. It is in fact one of ten countries in the world in which “estimated net outflow of migrants exceeded 1 million over the period from 2010 through 2021”. In Pakistan this outflow totalled 16.5 million migrants.⁴ According to a survey run in 2009 by the British Council, 75 per cent of young respondents saw migration abroad as the most direct path towards upward economic mobility.⁵

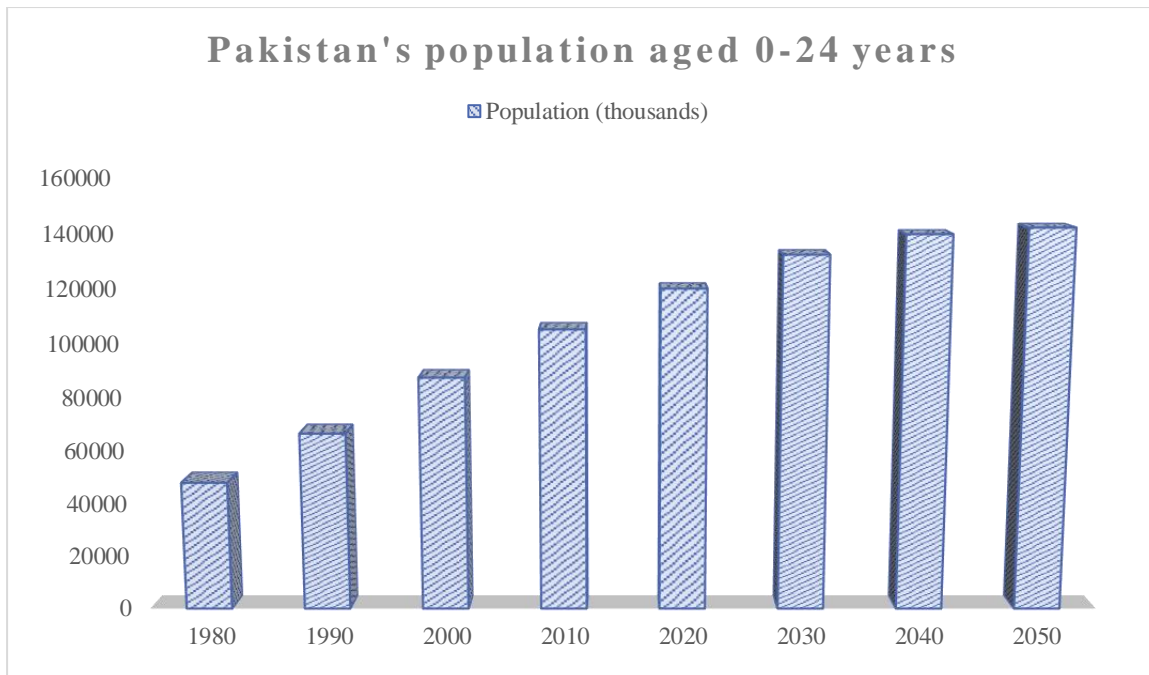
¹ UNDESA (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs), 2017, *World Population Prospects: The 2017 Revision, Key Findings and Advance Tables*, https://reliefweb.int/report/world/world-population-prospects-2017-revision-key-findings-and-advance-tables?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIx_uAmPzp_QIVvGDmCh0UygCZEAAYASAAEgL-5fD_BwE.

² UNDESA, 2022, *World Population Prospects 2022: Summary of Results*, p. i, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/World-Population-Prospects-2022>.

³ UNDESA, 2019, *World Population Prospects 2019, Volume I: Comprehensive Tables*, https://population.un.org/wpp/publications/Files/WPP2019_Volume-I_Comprehensive-Tables.pdf.

⁴ UNDESA, 2022, p. iii.

⁵ British Council, 2009, *Pakistan: The Next Generation*, <https://www.britishcouncil.pk/sites/default/files/next-generation-report.pdf>.



Source: Authors' elaboration from UNDESA, 2019.

The sheer numerical strength of Pakistan's young generation implies that the direction in which this critical mass chooses to engage with its country will inevitably determine the destiny of one of the world's most heavily populated states and, by implication, will also have an impact at both the regional and global levels.

2. Methodology

Through the testing of a newly developed analytical framework, this study has tried to understand the structure and dynamics of the social contract in Pakistan, with the youth at its centre. It is therefore through the eyes of youth representatives and experts on youth-related issues in Pakistan that this report tries to define whether a social contract for Pakistani youth exists, its main features and challenges, and how it could be improved.

As stated above, the main methodological tool that has guided the fieldwork for this report has been the so-called "Social Contract Analytical Framework for the Youth". This framework has been drafted as part of the same project, under the auspices of the Knowledge Management Fund.

The testing of the framework has taken place through:

- a roundtable discussion held in Islamabad on 3 October 2022 attended by 11 youth representatives;⁶ and
- various interviews in Pakistan with experts on social-contract-related and youth-related issues, and with youth representatives.⁷

⁶ See Annex 1 for full list of names and affiliations.

⁷ See Annex 2 for full list of names and affiliations.

The structure of the report follows the three main sections of the Analytical Framework as they apply to Pakistan, starting with the “Fundamental components of Pakistan’s social contract”. It then looks in more detail at the “Specific characteristics of Pakistan’s social contract”, and finally presents “Current youth concerns and expectations” in the country.

Due to the limited scope of the project, the piloting of the methodology could not be fully and comprehensively carried out. The report has therefore been built on the insights collected during the one week of fieldwork in Pakistan and concentrates most of its analysis in the middle section, i.e. the one exploring the specific characteristics of the country’s social contract and the position of youth in it, including their perceptions and broad expectations. Ideally, the first section of the methodology (“Fundamental components of Pakistan’s social contract”) needs to be complemented by a review of relevant literature, while the third section (“Current youth concerns and expectations”) should include feedback from a greater number of respondents, and possibly also obtained through the use of questionnaires and surveys. Both efforts were beyond the reach of this project.

3. Fundamental components of Pakistan’s social contract

3.1 The political-historical context

The historical process that led to the drafting of the 1973 Constitution is key to any attempt to understand many of the challenges that Pakistan currently faces in terms of state-society relations, and more specifically in terms of which actors have been and are still defining the main characteristics of the existing social contract.

The current Constitution was drafted by civilian leaders in the aftermath of the military’s defeat in East Pakistan, which led in 1971 to the establishment of an independent Bangladesh. It probably remains the only founding document of the country’s social contract, which was built on consensus and endorsed by all political parties and leaders as a vehicle of formal federalism.

Because of the loss of a significant part of the national territory, the military had no other option than to go into “political retreat”. Following the drafting of the Constitution, however, as soon as the military regained prominence in the country’s political life, it tried to fundamentally change the country’s political system. One of its major objectives was to change the system from a parliamentary federal system into a presidential unitary one. Attempts in this direction were mainly undertaken during the military regimes of General Zia-ul-Haq and General Pervez Musharraf. These and other similar efforts clearly indicate that the military has never accepted the current Constitution and has consistently tried to carve out for itself control over specific areas of state intervention and policymaking, such as foreign policy.

It was also under Zia-ul-Haq that a process of state-enforced Islamization introduced profound changes in Pakistan’s society, the effects of which are still evident today. He probably needed an Islam-centred narrative to justify his introduction of martial law and the suspension of the Constitution in 1977. And he also used the argument of the insufficient Islamization of Bangladeshi society to justify Pakistan’s loss of control over that country. Islam was subsequently used to turn society against ethnic minorities who were asking for recognition and increased autonomy, and it was solidly built into state narratives and educational curriculums.

A prominent political figure interviewed for this study remembers the work that he carried out as member of the parliamentary committee that was tasked in 2009 with the revision of the Constitution. The main purpose of this committee was to repeal previous modifications made by General Musharraf and introduced in the 17th Amendment to the Constitution of 2003. Against all the odds – and most likely against the initial calculations of the military leadership – the committee managed to amend 102 articles by the end of its work. This achievement can be considered as remarkable because there was no single majority party in that period capable of exercising some form of control over the committee’s work. This is also probably the main reason why the military might have thought that the 2010 [18th Amendment](#) would never be completed. The military’s hostility towards this amendment was confirmed in [2018](#), when the Chief of Army Staff, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, “described the Eighteenth Amendment and its redistribution of power between Pakistan’s central and provincial governments as ‘more dangerous’ than the six-point programme of Bangladesh’s founder Sheikh Mujibur Rahman”, which eventually led to the independence of that country.

3.2 Social stratification

There are stark differences among the country's provinces in terms of social stratification based on class structure. Punjab, for example, is characterized by an historical tradition of strong inequalities among social classes, while Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) has always had a more egalitarian class structure.

3.3 The political marketplace

There is a massive disconnect between the internal organization of Pakistan's political parties and the country's broader social context. The leaders of the main parties are old, while their youth wings are insignificant. The parties function ultimately as patronage systems. All these problems are linked to the limited democratic experience the country has had since independence, with the military controlling state-society relations and running the government for long periods of time. Democratization will have to advance considerably further if a proper space is to be created for a dialogue between the state and society.

Respondents defined political parties as dynasties dominated by landed gentry and replicating a 20th century feudal culture. In such a politically static context the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (Pakistan Movement for Justice, or PTI) was able to spread in KPK because it welcomed new urbanites, while the other main parties were effectively closed to giving key roles and positions to outsiders.

4.1 Specific characteristics of Pakistan’s social contract

4.1 State-society relations

One of the respondents characterized youth in Pakistan as divided and polarized along ethnic, political and sectarian lines. Most of them also appear confused about the role that religion should play in shaping the state and its relations with society.

According to him, about half of the estimated 130 million young citizens that make up the current youth bulge can probably be considered to be religiously motivated. Most of them are unskilled and define their primary identity as being Muslim, instead of being Pakistanis. Therefore, their social contract is with the *Ummah* (the global Muslim community of believers) rather than with the Pakistani state. They believe that their destiny is determined by God, who is expected to provide them with relief or an escape form a situation of hopelessness. This belief thereby relieves the state of any responsibility to deliver to them proper opportunities and a sound formal environment in which to develop.

The Pashtun activist Afrasiab Kattak also stated that about 3 million of these young people could be seen as forming the hard core of the country’s religiously motivated youth.

4.2 Youth participation and representation

One of the participants in the roundtable discussion identified the absence of active civic engagement at the university level⁸ as one of the most significant gaps affecting youth participation in social and political life in Pakistan.

Student unions were banned in [1984](#) under the presidency of Zia-ul-Haq. Prior to their forced disbandment they had functioned as elected bodies with the responsibility of negotiating with the universities’ administrations. “The most critical damage [caused by the abolition of student unions] has been the lack of student elections and by extension, the death of the concept of responsible governance in the minds of our youth. The non-existence of this training has left a political vacuum of sorts. The unions used to be training grounds for students to become politically mature, active and responsible members of [society](#).”

This vacuum was subsequently filled by the rise of ethno-nationalistic and caste-based groups. The relevance of those representing Pashtun, Punjabi, Seraiki, Baloch and Sindhi students has in particular been growing. In Punjab, for instance, there has been rising concern (at least among certain sections of society) about the increasing presence of Baloch and Sindhi groups at educational campuses across the province. Students from these two restive provinces, who are often admitted to Punjab universities on the basis of a quota system, have been increasingly associated with separatist or violent activities. Similarly, student wings of some religious-political parties are also actively present on educational campuses; the most prominent and widespread of them being the Islami Jamiat-e-Talaba (IJT), the student wing of Jamaat-e-Islami, which was established in 1947 in Lahore.

⁸ “Higher education in Pakistan ... is overseen by the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan (HEC), which oversees funding, research outputs, and teaching quality. The commission recognizes 174 universities in the country, including both private and public institutions, and some which are military or vocational in focus. ... all teaching at universities in Pakistan is conducted in [English](#).”

“Benazir Bhutto tried to revive the unions, but her efforts were short-lived. Later, even Yousuf Raza Gilani made a half-hearted attempt, but to no avail.” A few vestiges of the old political system still exist on campuses. For instance, one such student group is represented by the Democratic Students Federation, an organization that was established in Karachi in 1951 by students of the Dow Medical College and was close to the banned Communist Party of Pakistan. Its declared objective has been the restoration of some decision-making power to students in universities.

In parallel there has been a significant “development of private universities, with their secluded and ‘special access’ environments”.

Since 1984, political parties have increasingly been gaining control of life on university campuses, mainly through their especially established student organizations. Such organizations, councils and other bodies have fallen under this system of control, which starts with the selection of these bodies’ members, but is often enforced through the use of violence. Infiltration by criminal gangs working for these parties has also been reported, while other elements unrelated to the university have also penetrated such student groups. Unfortunately, various political parties have chosen to “turn students into gangsters”⁹ instead of concentrating on increasing their political awareness and participation. Many confrontations have opposed nationalist to religious parties, although in the administrative territory of Gilgit-Baltistan most of the violence occurs between Sunni and Shia students. IJT is largely accused of doing moral policing on campuses.

As noted above, among the political parties, Jemaat-e-Islami has been the most effective in forming small student wings at universities and in training youth to become involved in political activism. It is also the party with the widest presence on university campuses.

The state has not shown any concrete interest in trying to solve this situation of pervasive violence on university campuses, because it has been partly responsible for the problem. As with many other instances of the violent degeneration of the social contract in the country, this phenomenon can also be tied to state policies of providing support to religious extremist groups during the Afghan war against the Soviets in the 1980s. Today radical religious parties are among the most active and violent actors in state universities.

Because space for open discussions at public universities is so limited, social media are regarded as a potential alternative platform for students that want to discuss political issues. However, participants in the roundtable discussion pointed to the shallowness of most of the existing online discussions. Young people do not seem to be particularly interested in political matters or critical thinking, preferring rather to discuss trivial subjects.

Another element missing at public universities is that of “career counselling”. This lack of guidance is particularly felt in the case of scholarship applications.

Despite all the above-mentioned obstacles to youth political participation and civic engagement, there was agreement among the participants in the roundtable discussion that youth in Pakistan

⁹ Interviewee's comment.

cannot be considered as disconnected from politics¹⁰ and, more generally, from those dynamics that are central to the formation of a sustainable social contract. On the contrary, Pakistani youth are “concerned and passionate”¹¹. There is certainly interest on the part of the youth to participate in decision-making processes at various governance levels, but they are not getting the right opportunities to do so. There is a fundamental lack of “organizational capacities and of suitable platforms”¹² through which they can try to build a synergetic front of progressive ideas. In addition, there is also a structural lack of resources to build and formalize such organizational capacities and platforms.

Some of the interlocutors met during the field trip emphasized the ethnic peculiarities characterizing the social contract(s) in Pakistan. They saw two kinds of social contracts in the country:

1. one between the provincial authorities and the people living in a particular province; and
2. one between the central or federal state, on the one hand, and the provincial authorities and inhabitants of a particular province, on the other.

In the case of the first contract, and with specific reference to the situation in Sindh province, these interlocutors identified fundamental flaws in the system that were mainly attributable to the dominance of elitist politics. They claimed that a hypothetical area of engagement was off limits to them and to all young people who could not rely on family or other sorts of connections to give them access to this area, or did not have significant economic means.

Another issue identified as affecting relations between citizens and provincial authorities in Sindh was that of the provision of services. Since the 2010 floods, sustainable development efforts have given way to emergency interventions, making people in the province increasingly dependent on aid being provided by the provincial government. To make matters even more complicated, despite the devolution of several federal responsibilities to provincial authorities through the 2010 18th Amendment to the Constitution, the responsibility to deal with natural disasters still falls under a federal agency – the [National Disaster Management Authority](#). This centralized approach to disaster management also suffers from the absence of local government bodies involved in the provision of services.

Rural areas in the province were also dealing with a structural lack of information about policies and their implementation. This gap was being created by both a lack of resources among the rural population to access information and by provincial authorities not trying to reach out to the people of the province.

With regard to the second kind of social contract, i.e. the one between the central state and the provincial government in Sindh and its people, despite the promised devolution enshrined in the 18th Amendment, young people still have many concerns about the criteria that are supposed to regulate National Finance Commission awards. These criteria and the overall system meant to distribute financial resources between the federal government and the provinces are regarded as not being clear.

¹⁰ Even though apparently half the youth do not vote.

¹¹ Roundtable discussion participant’s comment.

¹² Roundtable discussion participant’s comment.

Sindh youth also lament a general negative perception of their ethnic identity at the national level, which may impact on their ability to obtain employment in federal institutions, for instance through the Federal Public Service Commission, a federal agency responsible for recruiting civil servants and bureaucrats for the country's central government.

However, despite these challenges, there have also been developments that should instil some optimism in Sindh youth. Literacy rates, for example, have been increasing, and public universities have been established in rural areas. This has actually been a trend under various Pakistan People's Party governments in the province. Annual entry tests to Sindh universities are also regarded as fair.

At the same time, the Sindhi (or Sindhudesh) separatist movement has become weaker and is currently almost marginal, with hardly any appeal to the youth of the province.

At the national level, many respondents thought that youth were becoming more active in politics. This trend was partly due to the (positive) influence of social media. Former prime minister Imran Khan's political party, the PTI, had been particularly skilful in utilizing social media to reach out to youth and call on them to vote. It had also promised to improve the representation of youth in parliament, although eventually it was not able to deliver on this promise.

The fact that Imran Khan could attract youth votes and mobilize them shows that political awareness among the youth can be activated if the message is right and conveyed in the right way. This significant development happened despite decades of efforts by the state to depoliticize youth.

According to an expert interviewed for this study, Prof. Jaspal of Quaid-i-Azam University (QAU), the Imran Khan phenomenon and the fact that he managed so effectively to attract young voters to his party revealed a clear desire among these voters to resist the state's dictates. Imran Khan was particularly astute in understanding this development and taking political advantage of it. Apparently his appeal has been particularly strong among educated youth from both public and private institutions.

Imran Khan included visits to university campuses as part of his continuous political campaigning. His main objective was to propagate among the youth the narrative that the other political parties were corrupt. By pushing for such a perception, Imran Khan actually endorsed a state-led narrative that during the last 20 years has consistently portrayed the country's political class as deeply corrupt. Further, other political parties are apparently replicating his strategy of reaching out to and recruiting university students.

Political parties maintain a traditional, paternalistic approach to dealing with youth. But according to Umer Dil, chief executive officer (CEO) of Youth Action Pakistan (YAP), this situation is bound to change in the coming years, because youth have become more active at the local level, partly due to the PTI motivating youth involvement in politics.

4.3 State capacity¹³

The Constitution enshrines most basic rights, but the challenge is in their implementation. Many people who are supposedly responsible for enforcing these principles and rights often actually oppose them. For instance, the security sector's main concern is to protect the country's external borders rather than guarantee the overall security of its citizens. The security sector deeply permeates higher educational institutions in the country, e.g. many university vice chancellors come from the ranks of the military and have been appointed to their positions with the approval of the military authorities. Other academic staff are often associated with political parties and are motivated by both ideology and career opportunities.

¹³ That is, the state's capacity to mobilize and provide society with equitable access to resources, services, infrastructure, social benefits and economic opportunities (see M. Loewe, T. Zintl and A. Houdret, 2021, "The Social Contract as a Tool of Analysis: Introduction", in the special issue on "Framing the Evolution of New Social Contracts in Middle Eastern and North African Countries", *World Development*, Vol. 145, pp. 1-16, Figure 2, p. 7).

Fundamental rights in the Constitution of Pakistan

A. Chapter 1 of the Constitution (Articles 8 to 28) deals with the fundamental rights provided to the citizens of Pakistan,¹ which are summarized below:

- Article 8: Laws inconsistent with or in derogation of fundamental rights to be void.
- Article 9: Security of person.
- Article 10: Safeguards as to arrest and detention.
- Article 10A: Right to a fair trial.
- Article 11: Slavery, forced labour, etc. prohibited.
- Article 12: Protection against retrospective punishment.
- Article 13: Protection against double punishment and self-incrimination.
- Article 14: Inviolability of human dignity.
- Article 15: Freedom of movement.
- Article 16: Freedom of assembly.
- Article 17: Freedom of association.
- Article 18: Freedom of trade, business or profession.
- Article 19: Freedom of speech.
- Article 19A: Right to information.
- Article 20: Freedom to profess religion and to manage religious institutions.
- Article 21: Safeguards against taxation for the benefit of any particular religion.
- Article 22: Safeguards as to educational institutions in respect of religion.
- Article 23: Provision as to property.
- Article 24: Protection of property rights.
- Article 25: Equality of citizens.
- Article 25A: Right to education: the State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children aged five to 16.
- Article 26: Non-discrimination in respect of access to public places.
- Article 27: Safeguards against discrimination in services.
- Article 28: Preservation of language, script and culture.

B. Equality of citizens and the equal application of the law

Article 25 of the Constitution says, “All citizens are equal before the law and are entitled to equal protection of law”, and that:

There shall be no discrimination on the basis of sex; and
Nothing in this Article shall prevent the State from making any special provision for the protection of women and children.²

C. Rights of minorities

Article 36 of Pakistan's Constitution provides for the protection of minorities. It states that “The State shall safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of minorities, including their due representation in the Federal and Provincial services”. The preamble to the Constitution also states that “adequate provision shall be made for the minorities to freely profess and practise their religions and develop their cultures”.³

¹ <https://www.pakistani.org/pakistan/constitution/part2.ch1.html>.

² Ibid.

³ https://na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1333523681_951.pdf.

Because of the country's strong patronage system, connections and networking are of primary importance to any attempt to access services and resources. The state itself uses and encourages this system, and clientelist politics emerges as a logical consequence of such a system. But this is nothing new: social, political and economic elites have always been an integral part of Pakistani society.

The same logic applies to the previously mentioned issue of the Constitution – “it's always the same people that get to define what goes in such a charter”¹⁴.

Overall, the state is perceived as having failed in its responsibility to deliver basic services to the population. Part of the reason for this failure is attributed to the privatization of several of these services, including education.

Further, the issue of the many separate ethnic nationalities in the country and how some of them feel oppressed by the central state was also mentioned. This is particularly the case with the Baloch, but also with the Pashtuns and Sindhis. Most of the youth in these more marginalized provinces are not even aware of their constitutional rights, while the provinces' political elites tightly control the space for political debate.

The situation is different in the Capital Territory of Islamabad. Because of the absence of direct oppression, young people engage with various issues. A striking example was the parliamentary debate about transgender legislation, which was held at the same time as the roundtable discussion for this project.

With regard to the state's role in guaranteeing equal access to higher education, some respondents pointed to the exclusive focus on universal access that characterized the state's approach during the last two decades. The system has not paid sufficient attention to the equally important matters of the quality and relevance of education. Following from this observation, they indicated that out of 174 universities operating in Pakistan, only a few can be considered as really relevant and capable of offering high-quality education. This selected group would include the National University of Sciences and Technology, the University of the Punjab, Quaid-i-Azam University, Lahore University of Management Sciences, COMSATS University Islamabad, and the Agha Khan University.

Instead of pushing every schoolchild towards undertaking academic studies after high school, the respondents argued, the educational system should strengthen its offerings of technical or vocational skills training and education.

The process of state-led Islamization of society that mainly took place during the 1970s and 1980s has had a tremendous impact on the educational sector. There are an estimated 35,000 religious seminaries or *madrasas* in the country, enrolling around 3 million [students](#) and offering them free board and lodging. The state should instead strive to channel these young people towards productive sectors of the economy.

More generally, the quality of public education has been steadily deteriorating. And while the UN advises its member states to dedicate at least 4 per cent of their national budgets to education,¹⁵

¹⁴ Roundtable discussion participant's comment.

¹⁵ More precisely, the Education 2030 Framework for Action adopted by 184 UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization member states in Paris on 4 November 2015 proposed two benchmarks as “crucial

Pakistan “spends only 2.2 percent of its budget on education as compared to 3.6 percent fiscal spending on [defense](#)”.¹⁶

In addition, the educational sector is also affected by growing social polarization partly due to the surge in the number of private schools across the country. Despite measures such as a constitutional guarantee of free education until the end of high school, the educational sector is breeding inequalities because of the differences in the quality of the education offered by private and public institutions. Private sector education is further stratified and caters to disparate segments of society, based on their socioeconomic status. Only the urban-based private elite schools catering to less than 30 per cent of school-going children provide a high-quality education. This is a potentially explosive situation because according to the last national education census conducted in 2005, 60 per cent of youth attended public schooling.¹⁷ As noted above, there are growing differences even among public higher educational institutions, with a few having become quite elitist in nature. And the use of English as the main teaching language in certain educational institutions is also contributing to such differentiation.

One of the respondents believed that poor people will eventually react against these increasing inequalities in the educational system.

Prof. Jaspal of QAU believes that the evolution of youth in Pakistan needs to be understood through the lens of the educational sector. He identified three main groups of youth, based on the kind of educational institution they attended.

1. The first (and largest) group is formed by those who have gone to public schools, and includes students who come from low- and middle-class families. Their main reference point is the state and they are generally aware of their rights and responsibilities in society. Accordingly, since they accept the principle of paying taxes and fulfilling other obligations towards the state, they are well positioned to question its accountability.
2. The second group is constituted by *madrassa*¹⁸ students. Their main point of reference is the *Ummah* (the global Islamic community), not the state. They tend to be indoctrinated and resistant to the development of critical thinking capacities. *Madrassas* cater to the poorest segments of society and produce graduates with narrow-minded conservative (though not necessarily radical) ideological attitudes.
3. The third group includes students who have gone to private schools where English is the teaching language. The children of government officials are often included in this group. These students tend to see the state as a provider of resources and services, but not necessarily in combination with their own obligations and responsibilities towards it. Their horizon is more international than the other two groups in terms of economic opportunities, and because of this they are in a position to raise questions of state legitimacy when they encounter related issues.

reference points”: allocate at least 4-6 per cent of gross domestic product to education, and/or allocate at least 15-20 per cent of public expenditure to [education](#).

¹⁶ E. Hafeez and T. Fasih, 2018, “Growing Population of Pakistani Youth: A Ticking Time Bomb or a Demographic Dividend”, *Journal of Education and Educational Development*, Vol. 5, No. 2, p. 214.

¹⁷ Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, *National Education Census 2005*, <https://www.pbs.gov.pk/publication/national-education-census-2005-pakistan>.

¹⁸ Religious educational institutions.

Over time, youth in the three systems have become isolated from each other to the point that they can, and do, pass through the school system without having to undertake any meaningful interaction with one another.

The delivery of justice is another central issue affecting the social contract. Imran Khan is also believed to have won much support because of his promise to deliver swift justice.

YAP's founder and CEO, Umer Dil, identified capacity gaps at both the government and community levels. The former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) were and still are affected by a serious lack of employment opportunities. Idle youth are considered a risk factor in terms of the heightened possibility of their joining non-state armed groups.

4.4 State-society relations

With regard to the role of religion in society, three national youth surveys conducted between 2009 and 2010 concluded that the majority (81 per cent) of young people (aged between 15 and 30) in Pakistan defined themselves as being strictly or moderately observant.¹⁹ This high percentage strongly decreased only among youth educated in elite schools.

Young people seemed also to give tremendous importance to their religious sects, a fact confirmed by the participants in the roundtable discussion, who stressed that members of religious minorities, such as the Ahmadis, have to identify themselves when they vote. Their affiliation with such a religious minority is also recorded on their identity cards.

Interestingly, the participants stated that it was primarily “educated youth” who were more likely to be polarized. This inclination, coupled with the rejection of diversity, found its origins in the radical changes to the educational system that took place in the 1980s. As observed in other circumstances, such changes resulted in indoctrination and religious fanaticism among the country's youth, which in turn resulted in a rise in radicalization that is still current today. The same dynamics have caused confusion among youth and weakened their capacities to ask questions and think critically.

Teachers have also been impacted by these dynamics. Those who have tried to oppose this state-led manufacturing of a religion-laden narrative have become fearful as a result of the lack of solidarity among their colleagues with regard to this issue.

4.5 The political system

Young people do not believe that the current political system allows for institutional reforms, especially to address youth's concerns and demands. No democratic values are present in the country's political system, and unfortunately not even among its political parties. Therefore, any attempt at reform has to start by democratizing the political parties themselves. Subsequently the system must reach out to people at the grassroots level, because at the moment there is no political awareness among them.

The overarching need, as expressed by various respondents, is that of “empowering young people”, which is an issue that political parties need to take into account. However, despite some institutional efforts to focus on the youth, such as in the case of the 2014 [National Action Plan](#),

¹⁹ British Council, 2009; *Herald*, 2010, “Youth Speak”, Vol. 41, No. 1, January, pp. 52-105; Centre for Civic Education Pakistan, 2009, *Civic Health of Pakistani Youth*.

the 2022-2026 [National Security Policy](#),²⁰ and to a lesser extent the 2021 [National Cyber Security Policy](#),²¹ the political system does not seem to be either ready or willing to empower young people.

Faced with the question of how youth could be agents of change, participants in the roundtable discussion were perplexed about such a possibility. They agreed that to reach this objective it was necessary to make students more politically aware, while simultaneously being concerned about the lack of space to pursue reforms and structural changes to the dominant political system. In their view, young people were forced to “navigate the reality [of life in Pakistan] on a daily basis”, with no opportunity to engage in wider questions.

Concerning the relationship between youth and electoral politics, participants in the roundtable discussion believed that young people are not disillusioned, but rather feel “snagged and frustrated”. They want the system to change, and embraced Imran Khan as a possible political actor capable of bringing about such change.

According to a former senator interviewed for this study, one measure that could trigger the increased involvement of young people in the country’s political system is the lowering of the minimum age limit for a person seeking election to the Senate. This limit is currently set at 30 years of age, as prescribed under Article 62 of the Constitution.²²

The military is regarded as the most powerful actor in the country’s political system, and political parties are said to look for guidance from this institution. Despite support for democracy, the trust in democratic institutions among Pakistani youth is far lower than in the military. Such a mindset leaves room open for an acceptable political role for the military, whether from behind the scenes or through direct intervention. This is one of the contradictions that Pakistani citizens have failed to resolve for years, with the youth falling into the same trap.

On paper Pakistan has a fully fledged political system in place, but in practice this system is plagued by various problems. To begin with, its fundamental identity is still disputed 75 years after independence, oscillating between a secular and a religious one. Furthermore, there is permanent confusion about who is really in charge of the country – either the elected politicians or the military establishment. True empowerment at the local level has also not been really implemented, despite the 2010 18th Amendment to the Constitution and the holding of local government elections. One of the respondents believed that part of the reason for the unsuccessful implementation of devolution in Pakistan is the resistance of the military, which saw this development as a potential threat to the country's unity. Some participants also believed that the provincial governments resisted and delayed the local government elections in order to avoid delegating their power to local level.

With regard to local institutions in rural areas, village councils have a huge potential to involve youth in political decision-making, as well as in the case of dealing with natural disasters, the urgency of which has been highlighted by the July 2022 floods. According to the Constitution,

²⁰ See especially at p. 44, under the heading “Human Security”.

²¹ Here the focus is mainly on the educational front.

²² The age limit for membership of the National Assembly is set at 25.

these councils are composed of between five and 11 members, and are supposed “to work with the administration on small-scale development projects”.²³

4.6 Economic opportunities

A Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) representative interviewed for this study saw three possible ways to deal constructively with the country’s youth bulge:

1. to increase the industrialization of Pakistan;
2. to focus more on agriculture and on the need to implement massive reforms in this area, especially in terms of land ownership; and
3. to emphasize the development of the right job skills for young people that connect them to technological advances.

Further, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor could also play a role in creating more job opportunities for young people.

Unfortunately, the military does not seem too concerned about the issue of the youth bulge, and probably only sees it as a basis for recruiting personnel for the armed forces.

Corruption is considered as a major impediment to fair employment opportunities. Only personal connections can guarantee a job. Merit is not really relevant in this regard.

Since the richest 20 per cent of the population are continuing to gain economic advantages, poor youth are bound to feel increasingly alienated from the system. Rising inequality implies high levels of underemployment for young people who possess relatively less marketable skills. The children of the poor, with generally little access to the corridors of power and already disadvantaged due to the poor skill sets developed in public schools, are invariably the first to be denied respectable employment. A disproportionate number of entry-level positions thus end up going to those who are already rich, leaving others from lower socio-economic classes underemployed. For educated (even if poorly) young men, underemployment has the same alienating effect as unemployment. “This is the fate that the underprivileged segment of Pakistani youth is staring in the face.”²⁴

4.7 Protection and security

Participants in the roundtable discussion raised the issue of illicit “war economies” in the province of Balochistan and the involvement in them of state elements. In particular, they referred to the issue of the drug trade across the Afghan border and of more generic smuggling with neighbouring countries. In addition, they also highlighted the presence of security sector representatives operating as private contractors and offering protection to non-state actors in exchange for remuneration.

²³ M. Mezzera, S. Aftab and S. Yusuf, 2010, *Devolution Row: An Assessment of Pakistani’s 2001 Local Government Ordinance*, Conflict Research Unit, Netherlands Institute for International Relations Clingendael, p. 36.

²⁴ S.P. Cohen et al., 2011, *The Future of Pakistan*, Brookings Institution Press, p. 272.

4.8 Freedom of expression

According to Prof. Jaspal of QAU, youth in Pakistan are using social media as outlets for political expression, but this is done in a superficial way, with hardly any references to specific political programmes. Young people seem to use social media mainly to spread political hatred.

4.9 Youth interaction with society

According to some of the participants in the roundtable discussion, young members of the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM)²⁵ were joining the ranks of the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) because of growing disillusionment with the Pakistani state. Paradoxically, the PTM is the strongest voice against the TTP and other terrorist groups in KPK and elsewhere.

On the other hand, there were growing protests in KPK, both against the TTP because of its return to armed violence, and against the state because of its perceived lack of interest in controlling the return from Afghanistan of such violent non-state armed actors.

Due to his close connections in the PTM, Pashtun activist Afrasiab Kattak has also been able to observe the effects that the return of the TTP to Pakistan's tribal areas after the Taliban takeover of power in Afghanistan in August 2021 has had specifically on Pashtun youth. The PTM movement, which is made up almost entirely of young people, has regarded the return of "jihad" as cause of "tumult", and has had the courage to demonstrate against the TTP while advocating for peace. Unfortunately, its actions have not found any support from the state, allegedly because of the absence of a religious narrative in the protests. The state is apparently more concerned about the resurgence of an ethnically centred agenda in the Pashtun areas of the country than about the return of Taliban violence.

Apparently the TTP has also tried to reach out to Baloch youth in order to gain their support in its opposition to the central state.

Another issue raised by the participants in the roundtable discussion was the lack of a "political culture" in these peripheral areas of the country, and hence the presence of the existing limitations on people's ability to channel grievances through non-violent means. These shortcomings have produced an environment in which affiliation to non-state armed actors is indirectly stimulated.

The FES, an international NGO active on youth issues, wanted to look at youth as potential bridge builders with other sectors of society and across disparate social groups. To support this vision it has started a programme of civic education that aims to launch a series of workshops at major universities across the country. This subject, unfortunately, is not compulsory in schools, while Islamic teaching is. Besides civic education, the workshops are also meant to deal with related subjects such as democratic principles, citizenship and the Constitution, human rights, the rule of law, and relations between society and individuals. The core objective is to involve both university and *madrassa* students so as to facilitate an open and non-confrontational exchange of views on the above-mentioned topics.

²⁵ The PTM is a social movement for Pashtun human rights based in KPK and Balochistan and founded in May 2014 by eight students in Dera Ismail Khan.

4.10 External actors

Participants in the roundtable discussion did not seem to have any expectations about the possibility that international actors could play a positive role in influencing Pakistan's political and socio-cultural landscape, and thus its social contract. On the contrary, they saw many of the recent international interactions as not being positive for the country. In particular, they regarded China's lack of transparency and democratic principles in its political system as worrying, especially in light of its strong relationship with Pakistan. Secondly, China-led mega infrastructure and mining projects in the provinces of Balochistan and Gilgit-Baltistan were seen as adding to the central state's perceived violation of the principle of equal rights and opportunities for all citizens irrespective of their ethnic and geographical identities. These accusations were based on the perception that such deals had been negotiated without sufficient consultations with local representatives and communities, and that most of the benefits accruing from these projects were shared between Chinese investors and the Punjab elite.

Prof. Jaspal, who teaches international relations at QAU, says that he has observed a widespread lack of interest in the subject among students. Part of the reason is linked to a disconnect between specific subjects included in university curriculums and the broader field of international relations. Secondly, hardly any attention is paid to the subject by the mass media, especially television, and only one foreign policy programme is broadcast in Urdu.²⁶ PTV World also covers foreign policy issues in English.

It is also interesting to note that since the general elections of 2002, India has no longer appeared as a central issue in electoral campaigns. It seems that political parties have lost interest in the topic, or that they prefer not to raise the level of confrontation between Pakistan and India without well-grounded reasons. Another explanation could be linked to the fact that foreign policy in Pakistan is considered as an exclusive domain of the military, and political parties may have chosen to stay out of this debate for reasons of self-preservation.

Anti-US sentiments permeate deeply among the Pakistani youth, and it is even more interesting that the more educated among them tend to be more critical of the United States – a trend that is not likely to be reversed easily.

4.11 Key demographic trends

Representatives from Pakistan's Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives (MPDSI) confirmed the ministry's concerns over the country's youth bulge. According to the [UN Population Fund](#) (UNFPA), in 2017 around 63 per cent of the population of Pakistan comprised youth aged between 15 and 33. This amounted to slightly more than 130 million young citizens.²⁷

Such a large young population was expected to pose daunting challenges to the social, economic and political responsibilities of the Pakistani state. The primary concern is the need to establish an adequate labour market to absorb such a large section of the population, many of whom would be looking for a job for the first time in their lives. But ministry officials pointed out that engagement with the youth had also to take place at the educational and political level. The lack

²⁶ "Dunya K 7" ("With the World") on PTV News.

²⁷ According to the 2017 census, the country's total population was 207 million. The latest [UNFPA](#) data from 2019 increases this number to almost 230 million, making Pakistan the fifth most populous country in the world.

of both high-quality education and civic space to allow for a political dialogue were considered as limiting factors in the relationship between youth and the Pakistani state.

Unfortunately, as was pointed out during the roundtable discussions, since the 1980s the state has engaged in systemic efforts to depoliticize young people, for instance through the previously mentioned abolition of student unions. This situation has led to a large section of the adult population proving to be very susceptible to all kinds of manipulation, especially by extremist narratives, whether of a religious or ethnic origin.

However, the presence of a youth bulge could also be regarded as a potentially positive development for the country. The Pakistani state could use young people's keenness to engage politically and to form an active body of citizenship, e.g. by using their call for accountability to improve its overall performance.

During the last ten years the MPDSI has undertaken various initiatives as part of a wider youth programme and in close coordination with the Prime Minister's Office. Core components of this programme include:

1. access to finance through interest-free loans;
2. the provision of vocational training, focusing on skills training under the guidance of the [National Vocational and Technical Training Commission](#);
3. a focus on youth entrepreneurship, through the provision of equipment and the convening of events;
4. a youth internship programme aimed at placing up to 100,000 young graduates in both public institutions and private companies during the next three years (40 of whom will be placed yearly at the MPDSI); and
5. a flagship project that will attempt to uplift 20 of the least-developed districts of Pakistan in order to curtail rural-urban migration.

5. Current youth concerns and expectations

5.1 Youth participation and representation

Various resource persons consulted during the visit to Pakistan concurred in emphasizing the lack of civic space and civic education for youth. No civic association platforms for youth are currently to be found in the country. Civic space has been severely reduced and the educational system does not address civic education.

Some respondents, however, referred to initiatives that could lead to greater youth engagement in the country's democratic life. One such initiative was undertaken by the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency in 2007, when it launched the first-ever Youth Parliament Pakistan (YPP). Since then 16 YPPs have built the leadership capabilities of around a thousand young Pakistanis aged between 18 and 29 from all provinces and territories of the [country](#). The objective of this initiative was to engage Pakistani youth in democratic decision-making and expose them to the democratic process and practices. The YPP currently has a total membership of 60, with representatives coming from all over the country and following procedures as close as possible to those of the country's National Assembly.

Another youth-oriented organization that respondents referred to as providing an interesting example of constructive youth engagement is the Positive Pakistan Foundation and its declared [mission](#) "to change the current environment of negativity in the society, emphasize positive role of individuals and empower them with skills & ethics".

Finally, worth mentioning here as a viable example of youth activism is the previously mentioned Youth Action Pakistan (YAP), which is a network of volunteers working for the sustainable development of the country.

Formally registered in 2018, YAP was mentioned as one of the "Active Citizen Partners" in the 2014 British Council Pakistan report entitled [Next Generation: Insecure Lives, Untold Stories](#). The organization is staffed by about 2,000 volunteers spread out across the country from the provincial to the *tehsil* or municipal level, 80 per cent of whom are under the age of 30.

YAP started as a youth-led initiative in the former FATA in response to the endemic violence that plagued this region and the fact that many young people were idle, with no concrete opportunities for employment and personal development. The initial work focused on a range of social initiatives, including cleaning the streets.

Later YAP moved into providing educational support, offering scholarships to poor children and orphans. While access to educational facilities up to high school is supposedly free and guaranteed in Pakistan, many families can still not afford to send their children to school because of other costs associated with such a decision, such as transport charges and library and laboratory fees. Umer Dil, the YAP founder and CEO, was able to raise the finance needed for these scholarships through his connections, and later through social media initiatives.

YAP is using social media partly to inform the authorities about the outbreak of local conflicts and partly to connect them to local youth. For instance, YAP sent youth volunteers to district authorities to mediate a conflict that had emerged between two tribes over a land dispute. And in the KPK district of Bannu, YAP established what it called "youth reconciliation committees". Youth's voices were not being heard and young people had no one they could go to in the

district administration to raise youth-related issues. YAP also established a “district review committee” to function as a sounding board for the youth’s concerns and demands.

Meanwhile, some of YAP’s previous volunteers have set up more than ten NGOs in Pakistan that work on social issues, provide technical skills, and focus on specific matters such as food rights for orphans.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

- The political history of Pakistan reveals the centrality of the country's Constitution to building a sustainable and legitimate social contract. The military, as the dominant political force in the country since its inception, has understood this and has always tried to control any constitution-making processes.
- Religion and its political use have deeply affected the main boundaries of the country's social contract. National identity has been built on a religious narrative, and because of this no current social contract can be conceived without taking this key factor into consideration.
- At the same time, ethnic identity is a fundamental element of Pakistan's social contract and it deeply impacts on the way in which social groups interact with the state and among themselves. Youth is equally affected and divided by these dynamics.
- Youth participation and representation were generally perceived by respondents and interviewees as the main entry points to a functional and sustainable social contract. All the youth representatives and experts consulted during the field trip seemed to see this component as indispensable for a social contract for the country's youth.
- Political parties do not appear at the moment to be the appropriate conduits to channel youth's aspirations for political participation. A profound process of internal renewal and democratization is needed for them to fulfil such a function.
- The lack of high-quality education and of civic space were other recurring factors believed to negatively impact on youth's ability to engage in an inclusive social contract.
- Civic education among youth was considered as one of the possible ways forward to try to maintain a sufficient level of constructive interaction with other societal groups and thus with the rest of society.
- The state's inaction and lack of attention to youth's demands, especially concerning education and employment in the peripheral areas of the country, risk radicalizing young people and pushing them into the arms of non-state armed actors.
- To specifically address the gaps in educational quality and at the interface between education and employment opportunities, ongoing support²⁸ to vocational training should be continued and strengthened, especially with regard to the kinds of occupations linked to Pakistan's small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs): "The SME sector generates 85% of the country's non-agricultural jobs".²⁹
- Small-scale educational assistance should also follow from the above, and should target mainly poor families.
- Similarly, civic education programmes should also be supported, as well as interfaith dialogues and youth conferences that promote tolerance and diversity. A recent example of an important initiative addressing the latter area of intervention is represented by the programme of the Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) to convene countrywide

²⁸ See for instance previously mentioned efforts by the Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives.

²⁹ M. Kugelman, 2012, "Prospects for Youth-led Movements for Political Change in Pakistan", NOREF Policy Brief, Oslo, NOREF Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, p. 6, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/137154/No.%201,%20Jan%202012.pdf>.

training programmes and educational workshops for the youth and to undertake a study aimed at understanding the educated youth and the challenges they face.³⁰

- The democratization of universities through increased academic freedom and the opening up of greater space for free thinking and political debate should be pursued by relevant institutions.

³⁰ The report compiling the results of the study can be accessed at <https://www.pakpips.com/article/book/making-sense-of-pakistani-youth-how-youth-in-pakistan-view-state-society-religion-and-politics>.

Annex 1: Roundtable discussion participants

PIPS office, 3 October 2022

1. Ms Roha Naz (Islamabad) has a BS in international relations from QAU and is a youth activist, a volunteer at Acts of Kindness, and part of the FES programme for young students on critical reading and writing.
2. Imran Mukhtar (Punjab) is a journalist covering the Pakistani Senate and the country's politics and an expert on legislation and political processes in Pakistan.
3. Sabookh Syed (Abbottabad, KPK) is a journalist and social media expert, and is president of the Digital Media Platform.
4. Ahmed Ali (Quetta, Balochistan) is programme manager of a PIPS project on Youth for Interfaith Harmony.
5. Ms Hafsa Zafar (Punjab) is a postgraduate student researching property development, the social production of space, the structure-agent debate and landscape transformation processes. She has worked for SDG Advocacy with UN Academic Impact by launching an initiative to build the capacity of university students.
6. Ms Zoha Jamshed (Punjab) represented Pakistan at the International Youth Forum Eurasia Global 2022 and is a postgraduate student researching the transgender community in Pakistan.
7. Osama Ahmad (Peshawar) is a postgraduate student in political science from Peshawar University and a young journalist writing in the *Friday Times* mainly on issues linked to KPK youth.
8. Imtiaz Ahmed (Kharan, Balochistan) has a master's in mass communications from NUML and writes for the *Balochistan Express* and *Quetta Voice*.
9. Ferhad Ahmed (Kharan, Balochistan) has an MSc in international relations from NUML and is young researcher on Balochistan affairs.
10. Faiz Ahmed Khan (Gilgit-Baltistan) is a PhD student in China researching international trade.
11. Ms Saira Rashid is a lecturer in Rawalpindi.

Annex 2: Resource persons interviewed for this report

1. Two Sindh students.
2. Dr Ishtiaq Ahmad and Rafiullah Kakar, Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives.
3. Afrasiab Kattak, senior leader of the National Democratic Movement, activist in the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement, and former senator for the Awami National Party.
4. Hamayoun Khan, programme coordinator at the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.
5. Prof. Zafar Nawaz Jaspal, School of Politics and International Relations, Quaid-i-Azam University.
6. Umer Dil, founder and CEO of Youth Action Pakistan.