

Report documents widespread frustration, alienation of Pakistan's youth

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A new report commissioned by the British Council reveals widespread dissatisfaction and frustration among Pakistani youth. Based on interviews with 1,500 18-29 year-olds from across Pakistan, the report also sheds light on the bleak socio-economic prospects facing the vast majority of young people due to unemployment and underemployment and the lack of basic public services, including quality schooling.

The report warns that unless Pakistan drastically increases access to education and creates millions of new jobs for its young people, social and political upheavals are almost inevitable in coming years.

Currently, Pakistan's official unemployment rate is about 8 percent, but over 70 percent are employed in the informal sector, where basic labor standards do not apply. The report found that among men who have left school, only 22 percent have full-time jobs. About one-fifth describe themselves as unemployed and most of the rest have unstable jobs. Among women, only 6 percent have a job and the vast majority of the rest describe themselves as housewives.

The report begins by highlighting the disastrous and rapidly deteriorating state of the Pakistani economy and its impact on the general population. The report cites a government assessment of the future of Pakistan's economy which states, "Pakistan's economy still faces pressures from an uncertain security environment, higher inflation driven by a spike in food prices, acute power shortages, a bewildering stock market, perceptible contracting in large-scale manufacturing and a slowdown in the services sector; lower than anticipated inflows and growing absolute financing requirements."

Last year Pakistan borrowed \$7.6 billion from the IMF after a steep decline in its currency reserves and the resulting loss of confidence in its debt. Now the outstanding loan is over \$11 billion which amounts to over 6 percent of GDP. The IMF recently stated, "Pakistan's economic program is subject to an unusual degree of uncertainty associated with security problems and the depth and duration of the global slowdown." The IMF says massive external assistance is necessary to increase growth and spending on social services. However, the IMF is demanding Pakistan implement austerity measures that will make day-to-day life even more difficult. One of these measures involves an increase in the power tariff, another the

elimination of gas price subsidies.

In a country where 60 percent of the population lives on less than \$2 per day, the global economic crisis has had a tremendous impact on the lives of working people and has thrown millions more into poverty. The British Council report states, "Blackouts are crippling industry and having a devastating impact on the lives of ordinary people. Without electricity, hospitals cannot function and water cannot be pumped. High food and fuel prices have made the necessities of life increasingly expensive. Around 7 percent of the population has fallen back into poverty due to the combined food, energy, and economic shocks."

Economic issues are the main concern of the average Pakistani in spite of the worsening security situation across the country. The report notes, "72 percent of Pakistanis say their personal economic situation has got worse in the past year. Only one in ten expect things to get better in the near future.

"Of course, ordinary people are worried about terrorism and the security situation, but their main worries are day-to-day survival." Most Pakistanis cite inflation, unemployment, lack of energy and water resources, and poverty as the most critical issues affecting their lives.

Access to education is also a serious issue confronting young Pakistanis, particularly the next generation. The report states, "In our survey, a quarter of respondents are illiterate and have never attended an educational institution. For girls, (wherever they live) and rural respondents (whatever their gender), this proportion rises to 36 percent. In Balochistan, nearly half the next generation has had no education at all.

"Cost is the main barrier keeping children out of school. Many children do not live near a government school, while even 'free' schooling requires parents to spend money on text books and uniforms. For girls, negative family attitudes to schooling are a major constraint."

Many young people complain about the corruption and favoritism evident throughout the education system. The report cites one young man from Multan who commented, "There is no education. There is a culture of intercession and recommendations." Another man from Lahore said, "Here, a student struggles day and night but the son of a rich man by giving money gets more marks than him. This curse has

become widespread in society.”

Understandably, when it comes time to enter the labor market, many young Pakistanis do not feel they have the necessary skills to succeed. Around half the youths that were interviewed considered their qualifications to be inadequate and only a quarter of them believe they have the necessary qualifications for the job they desire.

According to the report, “Many have concluded there is little point in becoming educated if there are no jobs. In Narowal, reports one young man, ‘If you have an MA or MBA you do not get a job. People are roaming around with degrees in their hands.’”

The report notes that, “Many people have fears about their employment situation, believing that too few jobs are available and that prospects are getting worse. Almost half of those in work, moreover, took more than six months to find their jobs, while many find their working life disrupted by corruption and discrimination.

“Bias against people based on gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and disability is common, while favoritism is also rife. ‘These days,’ one of the next generation complains, ‘whichever jobs you get are through recommendation.’”

The report cites another young man from Karachi who said, “The environment these days is very bad. There are no jobs. Everything is getting expensive. The poor man’s life has become very difficult.”

Corruption and favoritism are not limited to the education system and the labor market.

Only 10 percent of respondents expressed a high degree of confidence in the national government of Pakistan and the majority of respondents believe the government continues to fail in every capacity. According to one respondent, “In every department of the government there is bribery. Unless you know someone nothing is done.”

There is also a deep lack of trust in the Pakistani courts, police forces, and local governments. The report found that the military is the only Pakistani institution trusted by the majority, but due to mass popular opposition Pakistan’s armed forces were forced to formally cede political power to a civilian government in 2008.

The report states, “Young people feel they have few platforms from where they can express themselves, while a failure to enforce basic civil liberties means that few young Pakistanis feel able to campaign for change. Disengagement from the political process is widespread. Just 2 percent are members of a political party, while only 39 percent voted in the last election and half are not even on the voters’ list.

“The political class is seen as selfish and corrupt: ‘Politicians are busy in their own fighting and no one even cares or bothers about the public,’ says one young man from Narowal, while another criticizes politicians.”

This alienation is further evidenced by the fact that only a

small fraction of respondents—14 percent—strongly identify as Pakistanis, considering themselves Pakistanis first and Muslim second.

The report warns that time is running out for the Pakistani elite to collect the country’s “demographic dividend,” which refers to a rise in economic growth due to an increase in the percentage of a country’s population of working-age.

According to the report, “The stakes are high. Pakistan could derive benefits from its young population that will endure into the next century. Or it could miss the opportunity, suffering damage that will take a century or more to repair.” David Bloom of Harvard University adds, “It’s no good turning out educated people if they can’t find work. Nothing is more likely to breed unrest than armies of under-employed young people.”

In order to prevent massive unemployment in the near future, Pakistan must create at least 36 million jobs over the next ten years, but is currently on pace to create only 10 million jobs. The global economic crisis, the lack of basic infrastructure, and the crisis of the Pakistani state, which has become embroiled in the US’s occupation of Afghanistan, make it highly improbable Pakistan will be able to create anywhere near enough jobs.

Pakistan’s GDP is projected to grow by just 2 percent in 2009 and 2010. This is far short of the 6 percent minimum annual growth said to be necessary to create enough jobs for the increasing number of young and working age people.

The British Council report constitutes a devastating indictment of the Pakistani bourgeoisie and its reactionary communal-national project. 60 years after “independence,” life for Pakistani workers and the youth remains defined by poverty and inequality. The decision to partition India into two independent bourgeois states was a betrayal of the mass anti-imperialist movement that swept across the subcontinent in the first half of the 20th century and has done next to nothing to provide basic democratic freedoms and a decent standard of living for the working class and rural toilers. Today, billions of dollars are wasted by the military and looted by corrupt politicians while the elite refuse to provide Pakistanis with the most basic necessities of life.



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