



Episode 3

-

Young people: Loud & relentless



This is a transcript from [CIVICUS Voices](#) - a podcast series produced by CIVICUS. In this 6-part series, we will be joined by civil society experts and on-the-ground activists to tell us about their experiences with protesting.

Aarti Narsee (Host)

Welcome to CIVICUS Voices. I'm Aarti Narsee. And I work as a Civic Space Research officer at CIVICUS. This is the second season of the CIVICUS Voices podcast, where we hear stories from people, communities, and organisations who are defending their fundamental rights all around the world. This season, we're taking a closer look at the right to protest, or known in civic space circles as the Freedom of Peaceful Assembly. In our previous episodes, we've looked at the basics of protesting all around the world, from the Global South to other parts. And we've also looked at what "does it mean to protest in closed and repressed spaces where there is limited space to take to the streets for your fundamental rights?". Now, on today's episode, we're going to be speaking to youth activists about what sort of demands they are making. And why is it so important to include young people in conversations that affect them? I'll be speaking to activists from Pakistan, who are working with young people in innovative ways advocating for change. And then we'll be moving to South Africa, where we speak to a student activist who was at the forefront of the Fees Must Fall protests. These protests had huge implications in shaping the future of South African education and system.

So let me set the scene here, why do you think it's so important for us to talk about youth and to include youth? Well, if you look at statistics, you'll understand why. 90% of the world's youth live in Africa, Latin America, and in developing countries in Asia, there are over 1 billion young people between the ages of 15 and 24 worldwide. That's a huge amount. And almost 60% of Africa's population is under the age of 25. And it's no surprise that youth are the group that are the most affected by social, economic and political developments that are taking place in most countries across the globe. And yet, despite the fact that youth make up such a large part of the population, their voices are left out in policy spaces and in decision-making. It's for this very reason that they take to the streets to protest for fundamental rights and issues that are affecting them. Across the globe. We've seen that Youth Activism has challenged political systems, institutions of power, and of course, they've been taking on the fight on climate change. And we've seen this happen on the global scale. We've seen young people take to the streets in the Fridays For Future strikes, where they skip school on Fridays, to tackle the issue of climate change and to demand that their governments make policy changes to tackle the climate crisis. If you're interested in the role that youth are playing in climate protests, you can take a listen to episode two in season one of this podcast. At a regional scale and local scale, we've also seen youth protests, like End SARS in Nigeria and moving to Myanmar, we see Burmese students who have strived for democratic change and much more.

To get us started today, I'm talking to Ali Abbas Zaidi, who is involved with HIVE Pakistan, a social impact organisation that works with youth to address issues of marginalisation and extremism in the region. The organisation AIK Better Together social impact campaign engage more than 50,000 people in six cities in Pakistan, and reached millions more online. They also won the 2021 Nelson Mandela-Graça Machel Innovation Award in the category of creating positive narratives for people power. Sounds like exciting stuff.



Aarti: Ali, thank you so much for joining us.

Syed Ali Abbas Zaidi (Guest 1):

Wonderful. Thank you very much for having me. It's a pleasure to be in this podcast.

Aarti: Can you tell me a little bit more about HIVE Pakistan and how it's created an enabling space for youth to flourish in terms of activism.

Ali: So HIVE was an amalgamation of two big youth activist networks in Pakistan, one was called the Pakistan Youth Alliance and the other one was called Hoothy. These were anti-extremism youth activist movements. Both of them merged together in the year 2015 to form what we now call HIVE. So HIVE is, like you said, a social impact organisation, but primarily our niche is preventing and countering violent extremism. So we have been doing that across the country in the last 10 years or so, in more than 50 cities. We have been training, doing research, doing advocacy, and promoting counter narratives to the extremist ideologies that are present in Pakistan.

Aarti: Sounds like an incredibly exciting project. In your experience Ali, why are young people in Pakistan getting up and getting involved in protests and demonstrations?

Ali: So Pakistan has had a very volatile and fragile history when it comes to democracy because half of our life as a country has been in military dictatorships. So people like me, you know, people of the 80s, and the 90s, and even 2000s, they grew up literally in, in military dictatorships. And they didn't have the right to protest the right to express themselves the right to organise themselves. Having said that, there have always been very strong dissent movements in the country from the 70s and 80s. Very strong civil society movements that talk against repression, they talk about rights, they talk about emancipation of the people, you know? And youth have now realised, millennial youth, X, Y, and Z generations have finally realised that they can mobilise themselves, express themselves and really talk about issues that they were afraid to talk about previously. And that's why we see a lot of youth mobilisation and activism and agitation happening in the country. Even right now in Islamabad, it's in lockdown. I haven't been able to go to office, because there's a protest going on. So I think it's an incredible in a way that we finally have a very thriving democratic system. And these protests, and this agitation is just a positive indicator for people like me.

Aarti: That sounds fantastic. You're talking about you know, how youth are reclaiming this space in Pakistan. And I think that's incredibly powerful. Can you share with us maybe one example of how youth activists are breaking the mould? How are they shaping the conversation and rewriting the narrative in Pakistan?

Ali: Yeah, so youth were growing up being taught State-endorsed curricula, which was very divisive. It was very anti-minority, it was very anti-India, you know, but through social media, and through other means of knowledge, they have realised that these narratives were flawed, you know, they were fake. They were fake news, essentially [laughs]. So after realising and getting that shock, they have finally formulated a way to express their narratives through mainstream media and social media and through street protests. And that is something that is very, very incredible. So any issue that you talk about, women rights, you talk about minority rights, you talk about inequality, economic inequality, you talk about military dictatorships and civilian supremacy... So any issue that you really pick, youth are voicing their concerns and mobilising change. You know, there are scores of hundreds of examples. We know the story of Malala. But that's only one story. People like us who have been working in Pakistan for you know, more than 10 years, we know 100 more stories of Malala's, who have been doing exactly what the great Malala has been doing. So it's really a country of amazing stories and amazing people who have always stood up against repression and violence and fought for their rights.

Aarti: I think the idea that there's 1000 Malala is in Pakistan is incredibly inspiring. As you said, you know, her story has gotten so much traction, but it sounds like there are young people in Pakistan every day that are fighting for fundamental rights. How do you think civil society organisations can create a safe space for young activists, where their voices can be heard and where they can have an impact?

Ali: I think the spaces can be both online and offline. So when we talk about digital spaces, we then talk about circumventing surveillance, which is a huge problem. So I think CSOs need to have a very strong encrypted platform service because youth of Pakistan can easily be surveilled, and especially activists who are anti-establishment then get harassed by intelligence agencies and other functionaries. So a digital space would have its own ethics and own boundaries, and all our own rules of engagement. For offline spaces, I see a lot of cafes, a lot of public places like parks and libraries, and you know, youth sports being converted into places where youth are having these dialogues, you know. So in terms of physical space, I think we are reclaiming that bit by bit and having conversations that were previously taboo or were not allowed to be talked about, for example, the blasphemy law in Pakistan. So this is the draconian Colonial Era law, that has been misused for hundreds of years and it tramples on minority rights. So youth are discussing this in their libraries in their, you know, cafes, and what have you. Right now, they can't easily discuss these issues in public institutions, like their universities and schools and colleges, but I think gradually, that will change as well. So I think main, main conversation is really taking place online. It has taken place in WhatsApp and other platforms where people are bouncing off ideas off each other, you know, learning new narratives and learning about theories that they've previously couldn't conceptualise.

Aarti: So I think globally and in Pakistan, as you've said, you know, the youth are taking up the space they are, you know, speaking about issues that affect them. Why is it so important then for the youth to claim a spot at the table when it comes to issues that affect them?

Ali: Yeah, first of all, Pakistan is one of the largest youth countries in the world, more than 65% of our population is below 35 years of age. So this is unprecedented. You know, it's one of the, I think it's the third largest on record in the world with this amount of youth bulge, you know, there's this capacity of youth bulge. So youth have to be a stakeholder in the social, political, and cultural processes that are taking place right now, unfortunately, that is not the case when we look at the parliament when we talk about the public representation that Pakistanis have through provincial and national assemblies, and that needs to change. More young people need to step into mainstream political processes as compared to civil society activism because quite often in Pakistan, we see there's a huge gap between civil society activism and political processes and political activism, you know. So I think this gap needs to be filled because only when youth are involved in political processes will be able to inculcate changes and bring new policies and regulations that impact long-term change. So that I think is a bit lacking right now, youth overall, because of the sheer number are a huge stakeholder. And I wish and we suggest this to everyone.. And many youth activists also work on the issue to create a more visible environment for youth to be included in policy as, as key stakeholders.

Aarti: And I think what you touched on is incredibly important, Ali. The importance of the movement on the streets, and you know, the activism actually filtering into policy change. And that is where we want to be, we want youth voices to be reflected in policies on the ground. So we definitely hope that that is the way movements develop globally, not just only in Pakistan. And your organisation or HIVE has won, you know, this incredible award. So what lessons can you share with us about youth mobilisation for impact and change?

Ali: Yes, so first of all, we want you to use innovative technology to do more effective... When I say effective, I mean, in terms of programming effectiveness, and also cost-effective, we wanted to use technology to do a more effective campaign, you know, and we use the hologram technology, we invented it ourselves, we integrated the entire system in Pakistan, it was very cheap. And now we can use it for a very low cost anywhere we want. In fact, three days from now, we are doing a huge event in the north of Pakistan using the same technology. And I think that has really created an impact because of the wow factor that this holographic technology creates when a young people see hologram is for the first time in their lives that they're seeing a hologram, you know [laughs]. So there's this memory recall that they have. And then we associate this memory with some values that we wish to spread to them, values of tolerance, values of respecting each other, beyond religious divides, and all of that, you know. So it has been monumental, the impact assessments that we are doing, even through third parties have presented very good results. And we think that future technology and emerging technologies can be very effectively used to mobilise masses to do advocacy. And this is something by the way that is missing. Because when we study extremist movements, we see that organisations like al Qaeda and even ISIS use modern technology very well. And quite often, I've seen that peace-building organisations are lagging in the use of technology, and they are more classical or traditional in that sense, you know. So I just, I just hope and I feel that this new emerging technology of let's say, Blockchain or artificial intelligence, and what have you, can be integrated into peace-building processes, so that these campaigns and these advocacies and these processes become more effective. They become more relatable to young people, and they drive more impact.

Aarti: Ali, thank you so much for sharing the work of HIVE. It's lovely to have you on CIVICUS Voices. Thank you again.

Ali: Thank you very much. It's a pleasure.

Aarti: That was Ali Abbas Zaidi from HIVE Pakistan. And I think it's incredibly important and fascinating. Ali talks about Malala, and you know how there are 1000s of other Malala's in Pakistan. And there are 1000s of other youth activists stories that remain untold. HIVE is also leveraging technology as a weapon of activism. And I think that is something that youth do incredibly well.

From Pakistan to South Africa, where the youth are very well versed in demonstrating for change. Think back to the anti-apartheid student uprisings in Soweto in 1976. And more recently, the Fees Must Fall protests, which brought institutions of higher learning to their knees. For a personal account and on-the-ground perspective, let's hear from Busisiwe Cathrine Seabe, who's a former student activist and Fees Must Fall protest leader from Wits University in Johannesburg.

Busisiwe Cathrine Seabe (Guest 2)

In the beginning, when Fees Must Fall started, it started because of the 10.5 fee increment. But as we went to the Union Buildings in Pretoria to meet with President Jacob Zuma and he announced a 0% fee increment, for me, that moment that day changed the trajectory of the movement. It changed my entire life. In the sense that it was in that particular moment, that myself and, you know, other students across the country realised that our issue and our problem was not with the fee increments, but was with the fact that we could not afford to pay school fees, regardless of whether there was an increment or not. It was at that particular point in time that we as young people began to understand or to see that the kind of curriculum we were being taught was a very neoliberal curriculum that was there to reinforce a history that we did not believe in as young Africans. And this was more than two decades after the democratic transition. And it morphed into one of the most dramatic mass actions post-1994. It rekindled and questioned the idea about the university in a post-colonial society. One of its most important contributions is that it produced a new generation of post-apartheid activists and a new form of politics, and presented students with an opportunity to reclaim the position as the protagonist of transformation in society. In understanding the Fees Must Fall movement, it's also particularly very important to understand that our protests were met by institutional repression, political repression, and social repression to a large extent as well. So the response that we got from society was one that labeled students as unappreciative of the successes that had come with freedom and democracy. A lot of the institutional responses that we got was that we were met with a lot of security, heavy, heavy security, our institutions of higher learning, decided to hire mercenaries or people who used to work as soldiers in war-stricken countries like the Congo, which resulted in students further being violated not only emotionally, but psychologically, and sexually as well. You know, the political response was one way, you know, ministers would say that they are in support of the Fees Must Fall movement, but would not come to the ground to protest with students.

But would rather send the police and would rather send the military to intimidate, to arrest to physically harm students on the ground who are protesting peacefully. During this time, some of the challenges we faced, as a movement was being able to articulate one message. So we needed to bridge the gap, around intersectionality, we needed to bridge the gap around the 0% increment, as well as the insourcing of workers. And those were some of the challenges. One thing that young people need to be able to understand is that in most instances when we look to transform a lot of what we find to be wrong with our society, we need to make peace with the fact that we cannot transform what requires a revolution. And if it requires transformation, that is an easier golden objective to achieve. And it's something that you will definitely get support for. However, if what you are trying to address requires a revolution, then applying transformation principles will definitely not work.

Aarti: That was former student activist and Wits Fees Must Fall leader Busisiwe Cathrine Seabe from South Africa. And it really takes me back to the time when I worked as a journalist and I was covering the Fees Must Fall protests. I remember it was an incredibly powerful time to be a journalist and also to be a young person in South Africa, where youth were taking to the streets for a number of weeks and months, crippling the country and actually demanding that the government make systematic policy changes to ensure that young people get the right to education, which was promised to them when South Africa transitioned into a democratic state.

And that's all we have time for in this episode of CIVICUS voices, I hope you gain some inspiration listening to the young people on the show. And I think that young people are really leading the change on the streets through advocacy, through innovation, using technology. They are the future and they are taking control. And I think it's so great that they are taking to the streets and making sure that they hold governments accountable. We need more of this Youth Activism to make a change globally.

Keep an eye out for new episodes, which will be released every two weeks, we'll be looking at the different types of protests, as well as hearing from activists from all over the world in different context. If you've missed our previous episodes about "Protesting 101" and "Protesting in Closed and Repressed Spaces", you can find us on your favorite podcast app or any of CIVICUS, online platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Be sure to subscribe, listen and rate this podcast on your favorite podcast app. Thank you to our guests today for their insights and passion and to the youth voices for featuring on this episode. And thanks to you for listening. CIVICUS Voices is produced by Amal Atrakouti, Elna Schutz, Jemaine Krige, and the CIVICUS team, my name is Aarti Narsee. Until next time, goodbye.

