

# Faisalabad: An election we never expected to win

Wednesday 19 May 2010, by [TARIQ Farooq](#) (Date first published: 19 May 2010).

This was a bye election that none of us in the Pakistan Labour Party ever expected to win. Still we threw ourselves into supporting Mian Qayum's candidacy. Now the whole constituency of Punjab Assembly 63 Faisalabad knows that there is a Labour Party and a Labour Qaumi Movement that can take up the question of class struggle.

Although the seat was won by Ajmal Asif from the Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz, Mian Qayum of LPP received nearly 3500 votes, winning six percent of the vote.

For this election the PMLN adopted Ajmal Asif, a former PMLQ member of Punjab Assembly. Therefore the PMLQ did not have a candidate in this election. But despite this "unity," the winning candidate Ajmal Asif had 11,000 votes fewer than the two parties polled in 2008. In fact, compared to the 2008 election, the "big" parties lost this time around.

	PMLN	PMLQ	PPP	LPP
2010	31,000		23000	3,500
2008	12,000	30,000	29400	

In 2008, the PPP candidate, Rana Aftab Ahmad only lost by 400 votes. Although he is president of the PPP in Punjab, in this bye election, he received considerably fewer votes. Voter turnout was only 40 percent, less than at the general election.

## A difficult bye election

At the beginning of the election campaign, when I contacted Ahsan Rashid, president of Tehreek Insaaf Punjab (Imran Khan Party), to ask him to support our candidate, he told me that the party decided not to contest the bye elections because of the extremely different and difficult situation. They had taken part in three bye elections earlier in the year with their best result in Lahore where they received nearly 10,000 votes. Ihsan Rashid told me that there has been no registration of new voters since 2002. As a consequence many who have become 18, have never been registered. Additionally, he said that during bye elections, the government uses massive state resources. This observation by the president of a party that has tremendous resources gave us knowledge of what we would confront. Still we decided to go ahead, we had our reasons.

## Why we contested?

Faisalabad is Pakistan's textile city. Suddar, a suburb with many power looms and small textile factories, is one area of the constituency where we had the beginning of a workers movement. Since 2004 the Labour Qaumi Movement organized several industrial struggles in Faisalabad. We were able to fight against bonded labour and to secure social security cards for workers. Particularly during the last two years, the LQM has played an important role in winning wage increases in Suddar area. We had held several public meetings of the workers in Suddar and workers were

looking toward us as offering an alternative in the political arena as well.

According to one estimate, there are around 14,000 industrial workers in this constituency. When the sitting member for the Punjab Assembly, Ajmal Asif resigned after the fake graduation degree he presented for his candidacy in 2008 general elections was exposed, a new election was announced last March. We had no choice but to take part in the coming elections. We could not tell workers to vote for one of the candidates from a capitalist-feudal party nor could we ask them to abstain.

Our aim was to present an alternative and to do so with a worker candidate. The general presumption in Pakistan is that only the rich can contest elections. Certainly the PPP and PMLN always look for candidates who are either rich or have the backing of the rich. We wanted to break this presupposition.

### **The campaign**

We had two main aspects to our campaign: public meetings and door-to-door meetings. But we also had another weapon, wall chalking. Our candidate had two brothers who were painters. They were often the first to reach many areas with our message and election symbol APPLE. Our wall chalking was everywhere in the constituency.

Teams were formulated to take up the various tasks. Women comrades formed teams to leaflet every doorstep in the constituency of 119,000 voters. We visited on foot almost all 42 villages of the constituency, which stretched over 70 kilometers.

We also held 35 public meetings, attracting over 40,000 people. Both male and female comrades addressed the meetings with the largest rally on 1<sup>st</sup> May, when over 5,000 attended. May be this was a mistake to hold a large rally on International Workers Day. Following the rally, the PMLN candidate gave very special attention to this area of Suddar. He distributed money to almost every home. Although we were expecting nearly a thousand votes, and ended up with around 250.

We launched finance appeal, both nationally and internationally and received a good response, collecting over 400,000 Rupees for the campaign. Many thanks to all those responded to this urgent appeal. This was our third appeal within six months and every time we were able to raise a considerable amount from the comrades and supporters inside and outside Pakistan.

### **Translating Enthusiasm into vote is difficult**

We held enthusiasm at our rallies and many in the homes we visited agreed what we were saying. Almost, everyone said “Yes, we need honest candidates.” “We are tired of the big parties and there is a lot of corruption—everyone is a thief.” “Why are only rich able to contest the elections?” “We need an alternative.” “The poor must win elections.” “We do not trust the politicians; the PPP and PMLN are the same.” We had fiery speeches and workers responded militantly. Many workers donated cash and spent countless hours in our campaign. Some eight leading LPP activists from other areas, including Sindh, came for ten days to help in the effort.

No other party was able to do mount door-to-door campaign and public rallies. The other parties had a strategy of contacting the influential people of a village and it was their task to ask people to vote. They provided resources to these influential supporters and the state announced several development schemes that favoured their candidates. This was all in sheer violation of the code of conduct laid by the Election Commission of Pakistan. We held two press conferences to demand from EC to take action against those who are openly violating the rules; it was met with deaf silence.

Casting a vote in a parliamentary election is a complex issue. What compels a person’s decision at

the ballot box where there is little class struggle? In Pakistan's present reactionary political climate, there are sporadic revolutionary currents. However, the overall thinking of the masses has become apolitical or outright reactionary. The Left is weak and has little history of taking part in parliamentary politics in comparison to India. The ideas of political Islam are seemingly in ascendance.

When the Election Day came, it was the PPP and the PMLN who were able to mobilize. Hundreds of cars, vans, buses and three wheelers festooned with party flags and banners were everywhere. The two parties, reinforced by the mainstream media, occupied all the political space. Our leaflets, posters, banners, camps and polling agents were outstripped.

### **The Capitalist parties' strategy**

The strategy of Pakistan Peoples Party was to attract voters through two main issues: caste politics and development schemes. Rana Aftab Ahmad is from the Rajput (Rana) caste. There are over 53,000 Rajputs in this constituency. He has been elected three times from this constituency, primarily because his caste is the largest voter block. During the campaign, the PPP officials met with influential Rajputs and asked for their support. The federal government, controlled by the PPP, announced several development schemes for the area, including gas, roads and sanitation system for several villages. The gas pipelines were spread, roads dug and preparations begun on sanitation. This was all to show that PPP is doing something and not just talking.

In the past, PMLN candidates have also announced development schemes but this time they opted for a more naked bribe. This time around, the PMLN candidate distributed cash. He distributed Rupees 3,000 to 10,000 to families in the area. Taking the money meant not only promising one's vote on the Quran but also turning over one's identity card to the agent, who will turn them in on Election Day. In today's desperate economy, this turned out to be the most successful campaign strategy.

### **Our weak points**

Our strength is that we are expert in street politics. We are good at the factory level as well. However, in the parliamentary field the LPP has little experience. The last time the LPP contested was in the 2002 general elections. Over the past eight years, we have not had the opportunity to take part in elections.

During this election campaign, once comrades saw a militant response among voters during the rallies and street corner meetings, we worked hard to develop these events. We forgot to do our homework with the voter lists.

One problem is that the election commission does not provide the lists to all candidates, but they must be purchased for thousands of Rupees. Without that list, we were unable to identify who were the registered voters in the constituency. We campaigned blindly.

We were severely hampered by not having and working on the voter lists. Many workers, when they came to our stalls at the election polling stations, could not find their vote. We had not organized to get the workers' vote registered earlier either, when there was time to get the voters registered. There was no plan to contest elections from this area. It was all by chance and no one expected that Ajmal Asif will resign.

Our overall lack of resources was another weak point. We did not have proper food, residence or transport for those who volunteered for the campaign. We told our supporters: "You have to eat from your own pocket, bring your own cycle or motor cycle, put in petrol from your pocket and campaign

for us.” Only during the last motor cycle rally were we able to finance 100 Rupees petrol for each motor cycle. And they were over 350! In comparison, the supporters of the capitalist parties, many renegades from our working class, had their best rides on expensive vehicles, best food of their lives and cash in return for their support.

## **Our successes**

None of us had the illusion that Mian Qayum could win the seat. We went to an election we were expecting to lose. But we did it out of sheer commitment to build an alternative. At present, we have a team of comrades who can build from the base we did build for future elections. We have formed new committees of workers, got new contacts for the trade unions and LPP and many young workers who are ready to work with us in future. It is not pleasant to lose and it is worse not to take part in this election. It was also not good when we are disappointed nonetheless after setting rather high hopes. We learned a lesson from our January 2010 Workers Peasant Conference in Faisalabad when we announced that 30,000 people would attend. Around 10,000 came so we were a bit disappointed afterward. The Faisalabad election did not turn out as well as we had hoped.

Nonetheless we learned a great deal. I’m thinking of Pendori, a village where we had no activists before the elections. A bus driver heard we had a worker as our candidate and came to our election office, asking us to visit his village. He arranged a public meeting attended by more than 500 people.

But when I asked him on the election day at his village polling station, how many votes should we expect from this village, he said a maximum of 25. I asked why only 25 if there was such a successful meeting. He told me that people came to listen and liked very much what we had to say but it is difficult to convince them to vote for us. We are the first timers.

Late election night, I got a call from him. He told me that in Pendori there were 185 votes cast for Mian Qayum. He confessed that he knew it would be more than 25 votes, but he did not want to disappoint me with setting too high a figure. He reminded me that it is good to be modest in our projections.

Interestingly enough, in the home union council of the PMLN candidate, we came in second and pushed the PPP candidate to the third position. But the PMLN candidate received only 56 more votes than Mian Qayum. On his home ground, the PMLN candidate was unable to bury us and this is an important success.

## **The Follow Up**

We will make sure that we learn from our experiences. We have already planned a follow up door-to-door campaign to thank those who voted for us and those who didn’t vote for us this time. We have also called a meeting of all the activists and supporters to review and discuss what to do in future. It will be an informative day-long meeting.

## **Farooq Tariq**

spokesperson

Labour Party Pakistan

---