

The Pakistani Left is re-grouping

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The Pakistani Left has a history to be proud of and is regrouping to fight in new battles, as Qalandar Bux Memon and Ali Mohsni report.

Contents

- [Dictators' wrath](#)
- [Culture of democracy](#)

A consistent and contested debate reappears like weeds in a garden. Does the Pakistani Left actually exist? Some say no. These folks tend to belong to the Pakistani diaspora, disillusioned by the decline of the Left globally. Others say that it exists, but is fragmented and disunited. If the factions could unite, a socialist revolution would be around the corner. Still others suggest, with pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will, that the Left is there, struggling and often effective but not yet a national force.

We can report that the Left in Pakistan is alive and active. True, as a national force, it is weak. Unity, which would help achieve a national presence, is still elusive, although some mergers have occurred. But the Left in Pakistan has been remarkably successful in the cultural sphere. It has documented and presented the life of the workers and peasants and brought them to centre stage in national affairs. More recently, it has been working with significant movements of workers and peasants in what are locally known as 'livelihood struggles' to bring concrete changes to the lives of the working class.

The Pakistani Left has a long and distinguished history. It begins in a Chinese restaurant in London. In 1930, Sajjad Zaheer, a leftwing writer, invited a number of Indian intellectuals to discuss a short document over dinner. The meeting ended with the establishment of the Progressive Writers Association (PWA). As Zaheer later wrote in his biography, 'we wished to end the poisonous effects of superstition and religious hatred in our homelands'. PWA's manifesto aimed to change 'the standard of beauty' from 'poetic ecstasy and sighing over the coyness' of the fair sex, to the beauty in a perspiring poor woman, whose 'withered cheeks' glow with 'sacrifice, devotion and endurance'. It set the tone for generations of leftwing writers and is a source of inspiration for leftwing politics in Pakistan today.

After Partition in 1947, PWA became the All Pakistan Progressive Writers Association (APPWA). Its members included many noted Urdu poets and writers, including the celebrated poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz. The association propagated progressive ideas at the national level, both in Urdu and English. Progressive Papers Limited was formed to publish two widely read dailies - Pakistan Times and Imroze, and a weekly literary paper called Lail o Nahaar.

Dictators' wrath

But the Left faced persecution from the very inception of Pakistan. The government used colonial

laws to ban progressive publications and gatherings and jailed many members of the APPWA. Zaheer was accused of conspiracy; Faiz was imprisoned. The Communist Party was banned in 1954 and Progressive Papers Limited was appropriated by the state in 1959.

From then on, the Left had to face the wrath of one dictator after another. When General Ayyub Khan came to power in 1958, he immediately arrested a string of writers and young leaders. Student leader Hassan Nasir was tortured to death to intimidate students. The democratically elected Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who initially supported the Left, also turned against them. To impress a visiting team from the World Bank in 1972, striking workers were beaten, arrested and 30 workers were shot dead in Karachi. This marked the beginning of the regime's crackdown, resulting in mass arrests, torture and assassination. Bhutto's successor, General Zia, continued the policies. Brutalized, banned, with most of their elder leaders in jail and younger ones tortured and murdered as state policy, what remained of the Left was forced to leave the country.

Many of the exiled leftwing activists returned in 1988, after the restoration of democracy. By now, Pakistan had changed. There were no leftwing organizations, student unions were banned, and worker unions had either been Islamized or barred. Progressive writers were marginalized and their ideas no longer had the reach they once enjoyed. The state had privileged rightwing groups, showering them with funds, and had promoted the idea that the Left was anti-Islam and, therefore, anti-Pakistan.

Reorganizing under these circumstances was no easy task. The Left articulated two answers: it organized on traditional lines, establishing political parties and unionizing the workers; and focused sharply on the struggles of workers and peasants for better pay and conditions. As a result, a number of notable Left organizations and groupings have emerged in Pakistan over the last few years, including the Workers Party, Labour Party of Pakistan, International Socialists, Communist Mazdoor Kisan Party and The Struggle group.

Culture of democracy

Politically, the energies of these parties and groups are focused on establishing a culture of democracy in Pakistan. For example, when the liberal élite and the Right supported the 1999 coup by General Musharraf, the Left was the single voice in opposition. It recognized the historical drive of the military to expand itself further into the economic and social life of the country and its commitment to secrecy and the expansion of the security state. During the struggle to restore democracy, the Left openly supported the lawyers' movement (2007-09) that led to Musharraf's exile.

Moreover, these organizations are intrinsically opposed to the 'personalization of politics' of the traditional parties. For example, the Pakistan People's Party can only be led by a member of the Bhutto family - the party's recent leadership succession was decided by the will of the late Benazir Bhutto, with members having no say. Similarly, the Pakistan Muslim League, the main opposition party, who are currently in power in the Punjab province, is headed by one industrial family. Its current leader is Nawaz Sharif and the party belongs to his family. Such hierarchical, feudal structures contrast sharply with the political parties of the Left, which hold annual or bi-annual conventions to elect office bearers.

Gender and caste are also seen as important and members of minorities or groups that face discrimination are encouraged to take leadership positions.

But it is the Left's work with livelihood struggles that is most significant. 'We decided that it was

important to intervene in worker and peasant movements,' says Farooq Tariq of the Labour Party of Pakistan. Livelihood struggles organize workers and peasants to fight for their rights and save their land and environment, and provide them with political clout.

Sindho Bachao Taralla (Save the Indus), for example, brings together various groups to resist the internationally funded mega-irrigation projects along the Indus River. It has fought for locals' water rights and resisted a number of state interventions, while using ecological methods of political resistance. The movement emphasizes indigenous modes of activity and decision-making within traditional Sath, or people's tribunals. It is effectively working outside the state and resisting the state's drive to marginalize further the peasants.

The Anjuman Mazarain Punjab (Tenants' Association of the Punjab) emerged after the military's attempt to turn peasants from tenanted share-croppers to contracted workers on its farms in South Punjab. As it turned out, the farms were illegally held by the military, having been established by the British Indian Army and then passed to the Pakistan Army after Partition.

A million-strong movement emerged to resist the army's attempts. They took possession of the land and even refused the previous serf-like share-cropping arrangement the army had made with the tenants. The military reacted with extreme violence, but the movement has managed to maintain its control over the land. The association's success represents a significant departure from the norm. It challenged the military in its stronghold of the Punjab and won, and women were in the forefront of the (often violent) resistance. In addition, around 40 per cent of tenanted farmers in the association are Christian: the movement abandoned the religious divide which is often used by the state to isolate and marginalize religious minorities.

A more traditional, but equally significant, movement supported by the Left is that of power-loom workers in the industrial city of Faisalabad. Led by the charismatic leader of the Labour Qaumi Movement (LQM), Mian Qayyum, it emerged in the summer of 2010. LQM organized a city-wide strike of 250,000 workers demanding a pay increase and registration for social security cards which would entitle them to healthcare and pensions. The strike was violently resisted. Two LQM leaders were shot dead, others beaten and arrested. Four are still in prison. However, after shutting down the city for 19 days, the strikers won and gained a 13 per-cent raise. Since then, LQM has continued to grow. It now has 19 offices in Faisalabad, with two full-time workers in each, and is spreading to other cities.

From these foundations, the Left desires to push on to economic and social transformation. It's a difficult, perilous task. But the Pakistani Left has never been more prepared.

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P.S.

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