

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Asia > Pakistan > The Left (Pakistan) > AWP (The Left, Pakistan) > **Pakistan: 'Toba Tek Singh' - A left-wing election campaign on a shoestring (...)**

Pakistan: 'Toba Tek Singh' - A left-wing election campaign on a shoestring budget

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"Politics has changed in Toba Tek Singh," said Rana Hussain, aged above 70, sitting next to me on the bus to what in the 1970s was the heart of Punjab's peasant movement. "Only a few days ago, when the former Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) MNA Junaid Chaudhry visited the Jammani village to ask for votes, an elderly man asked, 'I have seen you somewhere.' Junaid responded, 'Yes, I came to ask for a vote five years ago.' The elderly man responded, 'If you did not come back since then, there is no need for you to come now.'"

"We know our rights and protect them," said Hussain, who got off with me at the main bus stand in Toba, and walked away on crutches. Amidst rickshaws adorning various election stickers, a black corolla with the red-and-yellow Awami Workers Party (AWP) flag was standing to take me to the campaign office of the AWP's PP-86 candidate Farooq Tariq, whom I was told was giving mainstream parties a chase for their money on a shoestring budget.

Born and raised in Toba Tek Singh, Farooq Tariq is the general secretary of the AWP. One of the rickshaw drivers on the bus stand had told that a new candidate with the Bulb symbol had been making waves and winning hearts. Known for his oratory skills, 58-year-old Farooq has been an activist for the last 40 years.

About 30 campaign volunteers are seated in the 10-marla campaign office in the "upper class" Islampura area in the Toba Tek Singh area. Upon arrival I was told to gear up for a corner meeting at the Jammani village. This is the last village in the Toba Tek Singh PP-86 constituency and thus the most ignored and impoverished. The route is adorned by barren farmland. There is a water shortage in the village in the Toba area, I am told. Farmers have been protesting for years but to no avail.

Located in the Lower Bari Doab, one of the last areas to fall under the canal colonisation of the Punjab during the colonial period, it is not for want of canals that the regions crop production and farmers are suffering. Rather it is for want of water. And thus water is the first issue that is taken up during the campaign speeches.

"I promise that if elected I shall ensure water supply is ample in the Jhang Branch canal," Tariq said at the public meeting attended by over 200, but with a clarification. "Even if I am not elected, I shall join you in the movement to ensure there is ample water supply. Nothing is achieved in assemblies, it is out here that we change things."

It is this bluntness to step outside the assembly and bring change from the ground that has won Farooq Tariq favour as the crowd cheers: "Bulb te mohra, thaka thak." (Stamp on the Bulb). Children ask for election stickers in droves as we leave. Running a low-budget campaign we have none to offer as we move to the next jalsa in the town of, before another jalsa at the peri-urban village of Gobinpura.

In urban areas, the discourse is all about the water supply (or lack of) in Toba Tek Singh. "Over

ninety percent of the water supply in the Toba city is contaminated with sewerage supplies. This is response for the spread of Hepatitis throughout the city. My father died from the disease recently," a local school administrator tells us and invites us to share our agenda with her 50-strong staff. Many of the teachers have already heard of Farooq's growing popularity. The principal promises, "I was a silent supporter of you earlier. Now I shall be an open supporter."

For a campaign that kicked off in late April has now covered 35 of the 64 villages in the constituency, including the village of the former MNA Junaid, and over 32 corner meetings and jalsas in urban Toba Tek Singh. The campaign has attracted mainstream singers, including Jawad Ahmed and the Laal Band, at two separate performances, bringing some relief for an otherwise entertainment starved city. The total campaign spending till now lies under Rs 600,000, with no food on offer and no votes being purchased.

People have begun to take note. And there is no better indication of it than when mainstream candidates begin to spread false propaganda against one. The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) candidate, Amjad Javed, has been telling crowds, "Aye kee rola pae gaya, bulb wala bae gaya" (Hear the news in town, the Bulb candidate has stepped down." Javed is accused by locals of being the head of a group of land mafia. Only recently some land reserved for a graveyard was accused to have been taken over by "Javed's goons" but retrieved after resistance led by old left wing activists in the Toba area. People speak of more lands grabbed by him, including land for a madrassah and government lands in the Chungi area.

The PTI candidate, Syed Akbar, is the owner of a pharmaceutical company, who has been elected as Nazim twice, without resolving the water issue in Toba Tek Singh. The Pakistan Peoples Party candidate, Amir Jabbar, the husband of former MPA Neelum Jabbar, has been known to be telling disgruntled former voters, "We are not responsible for the load shedding and overpricing, it is Zardari." Another candidate, Haji Abbas, reputed to run an umrah scam service, is contesting the MNA seat on the PPP ticket, but running as an independent candidate on the MPA seat. His message at his rallies is that the "Bulb-walla has lost his mind."

While the weak credentials of other candidates have opened up space in the constituency, the turn of traditional parties to negative politics is not merely limited to verbal attacks. PTI activists tried disrupting the Gobindpura rally by using hooters on motorcycles, the PPP candidate Amir Jabbar led a car rally in front of an AWP corner meeting at a chowk in a katchi abadi in the main city and one of his gunmen loaded a bullet towards one of the AWP volunteers; both taking out a rally and pointing a gun being violations of the code of ethics issued by the Election Commission of Pakistan. Nonetheless, no one left the two said rallies and Farooq Tariq held the crowd during hour-long speeches detailing the concrete pro-people manifesto he stood for.

With only Rs 950 million required to re-lay Toba Tek Singh city's water supply, a project approved then abandoned by the last PML-N government, likely in favour of the Rs30 billion 27 kilometre road built for the Metro Bus Service in Lahore, the metro is the first thing I criticise during my speeches for eating up the budgets of the 34 other districts of Punjab. Surely, there are questions to be asked about spending on roads, when a 158,000 voter constituency only three hours from Lahore is suffering a water crisis and a yet undocumented health crisis.

Farooq Tariq knows well not to resort to the traditional methods of buying votes, providing transport and meals to voters, and setting up election day camps. The current AWP president filed the election reforms petition that brought the new code of conduct for the elections. He also makes it a point to remind people at each public gathering that no money, no transport will be allowed and that these must be reported immediately. This is perhaps the limits to the change that can be brought through the ballot box.

But Farooq also knows well to remind people that change is not only brought through the ballot. "Whether I win the election or not, I shall join you in leading protests regarding the water supply one week after election day," Farooq tells crowds. The slogan that has caught on most is Farooq saying, "I am not here to win the election, I am here to take out the metal in the heads of traditional politicians." People are reminded that there is a difference between businessmen running for election every five years to secure their business interests, and those committed to politics as a full-time job.

The legacy of Toba Tek Singh's renowned activists, including the enduring 90-year-old Chaudhry Fateh Muhammad, who spoke with the same vigour at one of the rallies, and the late Ghiasuddin Jaanbaaz is evoked by those we speak to. This morning, it is the AWP President Abid Hasan Minto, who is due to address a jalsa at the Tali village. When some of the youth were told Minto was coming, one said, "I know Manto. He used to write plays. He wrote one on Toba Tek Singh."

While the Minto in question may not be the playwright who wrote 'Toba Tek Singh', his party may be in the process of writing a new script in the politics of Toba Tek Singh - and not necessarily by winning the election.

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P.S.

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