

What's left of Pakistan's left?

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For those in Pakistan who want to explore a non neo-liberal, non-right wing option, the Left is there in some form.

Imagine a trade union in a military unit in Pakistan. Yet that was one of the first unions that Abid Hassan Minto formed when he joined the Communist Party in Pakistan in 1949. It was a workers' association at the Military Engineering Service; the other one was in a multinational oil company at Attock. Such a thing would be unthinkable now, grinned Minto, the president of the Awami Workers Party (AWP), which was formed after a merger of three parties in 2012 (Labour, Awami and Workers' parties). There was a buzz about the new unity of the Left parties then. This was a renewed attempt to forge a clearly defined Left in Pakistan, said Minto, a sprightly 80 in 2013 when I met him.

The Communist Party was scattered after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, as also due to the resurgence of the global corporate system in the shape of the New World. The disarray of the Left was everywhere, and in Pakistan, the trade union movement was weak and it splintered into many factions. The grouping of parties was based on individuals. For Minto, the key question was what kind of politics the Left had to come up with to deal with new challenges in Pakistan where many things hadn't changed at all.

An opportunity to meet some leftists came up when the Progressive Writers Association (PWA) organised a meeting with communist ideologue Sajjad Zaheer's daughter, Noor Zaheer, who had come from New Delhi to speak about her books. The red-brick building with a small hall was the venue for her speech and when I landed there, my spooks, Beard and a new guy, were there too, and during a break I saw them questioning the organisers. They stayed till tea and when I tried to find my way out of the hall and mistakenly took the wrong staircase, one of them, not Beard, followed me and I asked him to show me the way out. He asked me, cheekily, "To India?"

But I was glad I had gone there. I met many progressive writers. There was plenty of nostalgia and Noor Zaheer was warmly received. People called her Comrade Noor, in memory of her late father who headed the Communist Party of Pakistan before it was banned in 1954.

I met her early in the morning at the PWA guest house over tea. Zaheer said what was most needed was for splinter groups not only in Pakistan but all over South Asia to come together and challenge the religious and other right-wing forces. Her father had left behind a legacy which should be taken forward and a lot is left to be done. The Left is also seeking a distinct identity from the liberals who hail from a class not interested in social change, according to Aasim Sajjad Akhtar, the secretary general of the AWP, Punjab. He is clear that activism alone won't help consolidate or add up to a coherent movement. Something beyond activism needs to happen and that was one of the aims of trying to bring all the Left groups together.

The Pakistan Communist Party was formed in 1948 by Sajjad Zaheer, Sibte Hasan and Ashfaq Beg after the Calcutta Congress when it was decided to have a separate party, but even at its height it

had only 650 or so members — the card holders. The numbers were small but the politics was clear: they were committed to Marxism as a gospel. As soon as the party was banned, since there was no real centre to it, it started breaking up. The deterioration was at the intellectual level — Minto explained there was ideological confusion which took away the commitment, and in Pakistan the party was young. He felt that now it was difficult to bring back that faith.

Minto didn't live in Islamabad and I had to count on the days he visited. But I could make headway thanks to the PWA where I met a few people who were knowledgeable about the Communist Party such as it was in Pakistan. I met Minto at a guest house in Islamabad and he was very forthcoming. He wondered why I took so many notes. "Are you doing a PhD?" he asked me. But it was a fascinating story and Minto was involved politically in other areas as well and was full of anecdotes.

For the AWP, the challenge is mainly to create an alternative to the neo-liberal economic system. Opting for a social democratic method is the only way out. For the three parties in the merger, Minto said there is no choice but to revert to the principles enunciated in Left/Marxist politics and they have to adapt to the changing situation. Departing from the earlier internationalist politics that split the communists between China and the Soviets, the new party decided to stick to anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism in some manner, and formulate a joint programme based on Marxist principles. While peasant communities organised in the mid-20th century, and there were some reforms, the ban in 1954 of the Communist Party and its affiliated unions put an end to further struggles. The Left was more of a talking and debating group than a political group, Minto said caustically. There is uncertainty as to whether the Left in a classical fashion will be able to tackle neo-liberal politics. There is an understanding that it needs a new identity which forges links with anti-Taliban and anti-fundamentalist forces. Minto is realistic about the need for a left-of-centre politics.

In the past, the Left had its student, peasant and trade union federations plus the PWA. The AWP feels there is a critical mass for the Left to grow in Pakistan and this could be due to the joint impact of Taliban terror and the onslaught of the middle classes coming up as the partner of the political system. But in this whole mass of civil society, Minto's question is: "How many want a new politics?"

There are other challenges. Can the AWP take all the principal Left groups in Pakistan along? From only talking, it has to work with the peasantry and the working classes, and the methods can be different, but there has to be a commitment to the programme, he said. The idea then would be to put the Left under one political banner and have an anti-feudal, democratic and anti-imperialist stand in the sense that Pakistan should not be governed by the international neo-liberal economy.

The communist forces in Pakistan have been fragmented by international politics and dissensions within, and support of the powers that be, including military dictators. Critics like Fayyaz Baqir, who was in Left student politics in the 1960s, point out that the strength of the communists had been in their strong literary and artistic agenda. Now director of the Akhter Hameed Khan Resource Centre, he said that right from the beginning, the serious shortcoming which persists till today, is that they have no understanding of Pakistan society. The communists didn't produce mass leaders, nor did they throw up non-traditional intellectuals or original research, he said. They were divided between the Soviet and the Chinese camps, and they made no analysis of the class structures or class interests, not to speak of the way the State or the political system worked in Pakistan. They didn't have an understanding of mass politics, and as a result, when the PPP was formed with many elements from the Left, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto captured power. The Left lacked an understanding of religion and so it couldn't blame the problems only on religious leaders.

The hopelessness is edged with a silver lining. The younger cadre is dedicated, though it is difficult to get students involved in politics. Aasim Sajjad Akhtar got into the Left movement by accident, through the study circle route, but that old assembly line, along with the banned student unions, had

stopped producing results. While Left mainstream politics was a force in other countries, that was not the case in Pakistan. The internal weaknesses came to the fore and there was total collapse; most of the old leadership left the party and the organisational capacity was eroded. The people who stayed on were very junior and they were pushed to the top. There's a lot of dynamism, he said, but no real regeneration in terms of a cadre of younger activists. It will, he said, take a long time to build a cadre to replace the old one.

On the bright side, Akhtar said, there's a lot of impetus coming from the younger cadre which doesn't have the baggage of the Cold War demons. The party also has to find new spaces to work. It is already working with squatters; it's associated with the movement in Okara where the farmers continue to occupy the land grabbed by the army. It's a movement that broke the taboo, especially in the Punjab, where the military is sacrosanct.

He pointed out that you cannot lay claim to an ideology because you own it, you have to build on it; trade unions now are pocket unions. It's about maintaining roots, the ability to be involved and in touch with movements which emerge while also focusing on building a critical mass, he said. "The Left is sorely needed for a third perspective. Ideologically, the society shifted to the right, no one is talking of class, gender or social cleavages in society . . . It will take time to make the changes." I don't know if Minto was questioned by the spooks, but both Baqir and Akhtar had 'visitors' after I left. While Baqir invited them inside and patiently answered their questions, Akhtar gave them an earful.

For the student community to feed into the Left parties, there has to be political participation, elections on the campus and the freedom to organise. Young students in Balochistan have already borne the brunt of their independent thinking. Working in the slums and with farmers may be a good start, but under the circumstances it will be a Sisyphean task for the Left to emerge as a serious and dominating stream of thought in the political map of Pakistan. The challenge for the new Left is also to reignite Marxist ideology which most people think is outdated and has little meaning for them.

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P.S.

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