

# **Solidarity Marches in Pakistan: Widespread student mobilization and political repression - A new generation of activists**

Sunday 15 December 2019, by [ROUSSET Pierre](#) (Date first published: 8 December 2019).

**After student mobilizations throughout the country, Pakistani left-wing figures - including Ammar Ali Jan, Farooq Tariq and Alamgir Wazir - were charged with “subversion”.**

On 29 November 2019, at the initiative of the Student Action Committee (SAC), “Solidarity Marches” were organized in more than 50 cities in Pakistan (and the territories it administers) by a young movement in the midst of radicalization, supported in particular by teachers. [\[1\]](#) The SAC brings together many organizations, some of which have been joined by other local movements.

The first aim was to stimulate the rebirth of student unions and to raise specific demands that have remained unresolved for decades, based on 9 main demands:

1. Lifting the ban on Student Union and its immediate election in all educational institutes
2. Overturning of the so-called administrative rule that requires students to sign an affidavit that bars them from any kind of political activity
3. Formation of anti-harassment committees on campus with the representation of women students
4. Allocation of at least 5% of GDP as for education budget
5. End to all kinds of securitization and violence on campus
6. University administrations must provide all students with housing facilities for the period of their study
7. Free education for all.
8. End curfew timings imposed on students in university-administered and private hostels
9. Reasonable employment for graduate students or announced minimum wage as unemployment allowance.

The law recognizes the right of student unions to exist [\[2\]](#), but they have suffered a form of de facto exclusion for 35 years, which has prevented them from playing their role in the conduct of academic affairs. As a result, the movement does not recognize any legitimacy to decisions taken by academic authorities in their absence.

More deeply, a new militant generation is emerging to take up the torch of the 1960-80s by singing the slogans of the time, such as “Yes, red, Asia is red”.

Student mobilization puts on the agenda a generational renewal of the radical left, with the possible creation of a new political formation in perspective. Ammar Ali Jan is considered as one of the main leaders of the "Solidarity Marches". He explains on his Facebook page:

*This is only the beginning. A new possibility has emerged in Pakistan. It is the possibility of a people's politics that is not run by feudals, industrialists or the establishment. It is a politics based on grassroots campaigns run by ordinary citizens, in which the voiceless are finally heard.*

We will have to do a lot more to deepen our work among the masses. We resolve to continue fighting for social and economic rights to the best of our abilities. With unity, discipline and kindness, I am certain we will win.

He characterizes this mobilization as a "civil rights movement", demanding the implementation of the rights recognized to the people in the Constitution, clauses introduced thanks to the action of left-wing forces from 1968 onwards. The aspiration to equal rights is indeed very important in this mobilization whose flag is solidarity.

The English-language Pakistani daily newspaper *Dawn* asked about the various political perspectives of the organizers of the student marches. What can be the perspective of the current wave of struggle? While capitalism is proving incapable of social justice, is it necessary to create a new radical left-wing party supported by the current militant generation, in the short or medium term? [3]

Interviewees of *Dawn* argue that this political party will provide representation for all. Thus, they claim "the party would give equal representation to all segments of society and there would be no discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnicity, religion and social status." "We will demand end to all the discriminatory laws against women, children and the minorities." The party will "focus progress of the marginalized communities and segments of society, including women, transgender persons, labour and the minorities," says one of the organizers.

## **Repression**

On the occasion of the Marches, a gathering of 250-300 people was held in Lahore. The union of bricklayers' workers, subject to feudal working conditions, was present, as well as many progressive organizations [4]. While ministers and members of the government were expressing their sympathy for the movement, the police have decided to charge, on behalf of the state, a some of the participants in this rally with a series of offences or crimes ranging from the unauthorized use of loudspeakers (a violation of the Punjab Sound Systems (Regulation) Act) to sedition! The choice of the persons targeted is very selective. [5] Those concerned are:

- Ammar Ali Jan, central and very popular figure of the movement.
- Farooq Tariq, leader of the Lahore Left Front and well known for his many left-wing engagements in Pakistan.
- Iqbal Lala, father of Mashal Khan, the student lynched at Wali Khan University, Mardan. Iqbal Lala received a standing ovation when he came to support student mobilization.
- Alamgir Wazir, leader of the Pashto Council of the University of Punjab and nephew of Ali Wazir, a member of the National Assembly who himself suffered very severe repression. [6] Alamgir Wazir is the only one who was immediately jailed.
- Mohammad Shabbir, Secretary General of the Pakistan Bhatta Mazdoor Union (Brick Kiln Worker

Union) and

- Kamil Khan, a student activist.

The activists posted preventive bail to avoid being detained, which the court accepted. These non-imprisoned bail cases have yet to be confirmed. Alamgir Wazir could also be released on bail. The battle is being fought both legally and politically.

These indictments are making a lot of noise in Pakistan and beyond. Support demonstrations are taking place in universities and on the streets. Amnesty International has condemned the “flagrant violation of the right of expression, freedom of association and freedom of peaceful assembly” of students. “The charges against the organizers must be dropped and anyone arrested for peacefully participating in the protests must be released immediately and unconditionally. Amnesty points out that the origin of the criminal code clauses used against activists is part of the British colonial order. [7]

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) was particularly alarmed by the repression of students, as well as by the smear campaign conducted in the media against the Solidarity Marches. “Students have the right to oppose fee hikes and budget cuts to higher education, and to call for an end to unnecessary interference by security forces on campus, for functional anti-harassment committees with student representation, and above all, for the restoration of student unions. HRCP stands in solidarity with all students taking part across the country on Friday. [8]

A student delegation from the Marches was also received by the Senate Human Rights Committee on the sedition charges. The committee condemned the indictments, in particular the one against Iqbal Lala, as well as the harassment of the March organizers. It also provided support to student unions. The delegation agreed with the Senate Committee’s recommendation to work with the administration to create a common framework and for the movement’s leaders to continue to speak within the constitutional framework, while hoping that those who have abducted and threatened students will also commit to respecting the law.

The question of respect for constitutional freedoms goes beyond the academic question. The editorial staff of *Dawn* was besieged by demonstrators in Islamabad and received telephone threats following an article on the recent terrorist attack in London, carried out by a British man whose family is from Pakistan. [9] Bloggers, trade unionists, peasant executives, nationalists, human rights or environmental defenders, political activists are often brutally repressed.

The struggle initiated by the new generation of activists that was spectacularly demonstrated during the Solidarity Marches concerns the entire society in Pakistan. It deserves full international support. Much is at stake in the current wave of youth radicalization.

**Pierre Rousset**

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• Translation IVP, 15 December 2019:  
<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article6326>

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## Footnotes

[1] ESSF [“Pakistan: The Students’ Solidarity March for Student Unions!”](#).

[2] See Public Sector Universities Act, 1973.

[3] *Dawn*, 4 December 2019 [“More than a student march: Left-wing organisers carry higher political ambitions ”](#) or [ESSF](#). The previous quotation from Amar Ali Jan is from this article.

[4] including the Haqooq e Khalq Movement, Pakistan Trade Union Defence Campaign (PTUDC), Progressive Academics Collective, Women Democratic Front, Aurat March, Rawadari Movement, Mazdoor Kissan Party, Awami Workers Party, Communist Party, as well as Pakistan People’s Party Shaheed Bhutto.

[5] See ESSF, [“Pakistan: Sedition cases registered against organisers and participants of student march”](#).

[6] Concerning Ali Wazir, see on ESSF [WAZIR Ali / WAZEER Ali](#).

[7] Amnesty, 1 December 2019 [“Pakistan: End crackdown on student protests ”](#).

[8] ESSF 29 November 2019, [Pakistan: Government must not curb Students’ Solidarity March”](#).

[9] See *Dawn* 5 December 2019 [“An attack on Dawn is an attack on us all’ : Journalists rally against siege of Islamabad offices.](#)  
” also on [ESSF](#).