

# Pakistan: A Call for Revolutionary Internationalism

Friday 22 May 2020, by [AKHTAR Aasim Sajjad](#) (Date first published: 16 May 2020).

**“If you do not condemn colonialism, if you do not side with the colonized people, what kind of revolution are you waging?”**

**Ho Che Minh**

For all of the outrage that many rightly feel, it is not surprising that the Pakistan state’s inherently authoritarian streak has come to the fore in the midst of the pandemic. COVID-19 has exposed the racialised and gendered logic of capital everywhere, not least of all in post-colonial states. The murder of Arif Wazir, the discovery of Sajid Hussain’s body in Sweden two months after he disappeared and the killing of two young Baloch men who had turned to militancy only a few short years after graduating from the country’s pre-eminent public sector university are not necessarily coordinated actions as part of a wider state policy devised to ‘take advantage’ of the shutdown of ‘normal life’ due to the novel coronavirus. They are just the most recent and spectacular episodes in the subcontinent’s longstanding series of colonial statecraft.

Put differently, these incidents simply remind us of what ‘normal’ looks like in Pakistan’s ethnic peripheries, pandemic or not. The fates of these young men are on the extreme pole of a spectrum of repression that awaits those who make the conscious political choice to challenge the colonial writ of the state. It is not as if the community of political dissidents in Pakistan is comprised only of Pashtun, Baloch and Sindhi youth. Nor that all Pashtun and Baloch youth are, by dint of their ethnic identity, necessarily dissidents. Even if our numbers are small and we are sadly as divided as united, the political community of what can broadly be termed ‘progressives’ in Pakistan includes many from within the Punjabi heartland of power as well. [1]

But there is little doubt that a wholly disproportionate weight of violent repression falls on the shoulders of those labeled ‘suspicious’ simply by virtue of their ethnic inheritance. The experience of discrimination is *felt* viscerally by Baloch, Pashtun, Sindhi and other historically oppressed ethnic-nations. This includes a host of depredations visited upon them on their own soil. The feeling of oppression is exacerbated in urban centres and/or central regions, where they go to escape the ravages of war/terrorism, or for education/employment in the hope and expectation of upward social mobility. The humiliation visited upon them as migrants is particularly galling, as confirmed by both the murder of Naquibullah Mehsud, the lightning rod for the formation of PTM, and the journey of Shah Daad and Ihsaan Baloch from the ‘civility’ of enrolling as Quaid-e-Azam University’s students to ‘pariahs’ picking up arms against the state.

I wish to qualify the above statement about repression necessarily being the fate of those who consciously choose to become political rebels. It is axiomatic that the worst wrath of the (post) colonial state is reserved for the most self-aware and conscious political workers, including those who hail from the Punjabi heartland. [2] It is, after all, in the central regions of the state that the hegemonic apparatus is most developed: it is here that the education system, mainstream media,

religious establishment, etc are tasked with posing unitary state nationalism, Islam-as-cultural-genius and patriarchal normativity as unchallenged objective truths to be parroted by all loyal citizens.

It is, therefore, generally true that for the Punjabi or Urdu-speaking dissident, political awakening is not borne of personal suffering, but of a recognition that the dominant 'objective truths' are in fact 'official' histories penned by the powerful, in which ethnic peripheries in particular and the wretched of the earth more generally (both in the centre and peripheries) are rendered invisible, even expendable.

For the peripheral subject, however, politicisation is an experience borne of suffering. If one has not been directly subjected to physical or mental torture, then a close relative or acquaintance almost certainly has been. [3] One need not explicitly take up a political cause to be subjected to repression. The most obvious case is that of Baloch youth – so many have been disappeared and/or killed simply for being related to a known dissident, or even for being educated and mixing in certain circles. [4] A similar fate awaited many in Swat, Waziristan and other epicentres of military operations when family members of individuals alleged to be affiliated with the TTP were disappeared and subjected to unspeakable treatment in internment centres. [5]

It is with such examples in mind that it becomes clear what it means to 'feel' like a second-class citizen, or, perhaps most accurately, a colonial subject. I wish to also reiterate, however, that not all Pashtuns, Baloch, Sindhis, Siraikis, Hazaras, and so on inhabit such lifeworlds. The very insidious nature of colonialism is reflected in Fanon's famous words: "The colonised is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards." [6] In the current conjuncture, the equivalent of adopting the 'mother country's cultural standards' is to buy into the established rules of the game – or what I have elsewhere called, following Gramsci, the politics of 'common sense'. [7] In short, to hail from the ethnic peripheries does not preclude affluence and ascension to positions of power within the ruling class/establishment. [8] By imbibing the logic of capital and peddling the hegemonic narrative of the Pakistani state, particularly vis-a-vis the restive peripheries and the disquieting elements who challenge the edifices of state, class, and other forms of power, the 'colonised is elevated above his jungle status'.

Hence, there are considerable fissures within the oppressed ethnic-nations of Pakistan, in class and gendered terms especially so. The nation's most conscious political elements who consider themselves inheritors of the anti-colonial struggle – the contemporary leaders of the national movement – do not deny these internal fissures.

For this political element, as well as for progressives outside the ethnic-nation, the deaths of Arif Wazir, Sajid Hussain, Ihsaan Baloch and Shah Daad Baloch do not constitute a shock as much as confirm what we already know about contemporary colonial statecraft and its brutalising fallouts. Such brutalisation can further limit our imagination of a progressive politics within the confines of the Pakistani state that brings together all of the ethnic-nations that inhabit it, or make even more urgent the building of precisely such a politics. And if so, it is the most conscious political element within and across ethnic-nations that can make revolutionary internationalism our political horizon.

Such a horizon is certainly not beyond our imagination. Oppressed ethnic-nations have made common cause with the Left in the Punjabi/central regions of Pakistan before. Most significantly, the National Awami Party came to power in both Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (at that time known as NWFP) following the 1970 election on a political programme vowing to transform Pakistan into a federal, democratic and socialist polity.

Left praxis throughout the modern period has conceptualised crisis as the progenitor of the new.

The pandemic generates potentialities to reset political imaginaries, and ultimately, practices. Examining the imperative of rehabilitating imaginaries of a NAP-type political formation in Pakistan – and also moving beyond it in some crucial ways – is paramount, and first requires an exploration of divergent nationalist movements in Pakistan, particularly in the post-Cold War period.

## **The Divergent Trajectories of National Movements in Pakistan**

Both the Left in Pakistan's central regions and progressive ethnic-national movements in its peripheries have become more insular during the interregnum known as 'neo-liberal globalisation'. There are many inter-related reasons for this, including the growing digitalisation of the political field, the tendency to emphasise a politics of recognition over a politics of redistribution [9], as well as more objective factors such as the geographical unevenness of development (both the long-established contradictions between centre and peripheries and the differential developmental trajectories of ethnic peripheries themselves). [10]

Two contemporary ethnic-national movements illuminate both the immediate past and potentialities for the future. These are the two movements most brutalised by the Pakistani state's prosecution of the so-called 'War on Terror' since the turn of the century. [11] While this war was geographically centred on the Pashtun northwest of Pakistan, it was nevertheless a pretext for yet another phase of military operations against Baloch nationalists in both the traditional heartlands of the Baloch ethnic-national movement (Marri, Mengal, Bugti tribal zones) and more emergent centres of nationalism in Makkuran. [12]

The obvious differences between the contemporary Pashtun and Baloch national movements is embodied by the recent deaths/murders of Arif Wazir on the one hand, and Sajid Hussain, Ihsaan Baloch and Shah Daad Baloch on the other. The PTM's response to Arif Wazir's cold blooded killing was consistent with its strategic posture since its inception almost 30 months ago: to ask its supporters to remain calm, to reiterate the principle of non-violence, and to refract the burden of violence back onto the state.

Contrast this assertive and relatively unified posture of the Pashtun national movement, celebrated openly in the digital space, to the considerably more masked and fragmented response to the deaths of Sajid Hussain, as well as Ihsaan and Shah Daad. Sajid Hussain had secured political asylum in Sweden two years ago under the pretext of a threat to his life on account of his critical journalism vis-a-vis state repression in Balochistan. While his death thousands of miles away from Pakistan cannot directly be attributed to the state, it certainly reinforced the sense that Baloch who speak for the rights of their nation can face retribution wherever they may be. Meanwhile the personal trajectories of Shah Daad and Ihsaan are even more telling insofar as they reflect that even those Baloch youth seeking to become part of the Pakistani mainstream become disaffected enough to take up arms against the state, eventually losing their lives like so many before them.

While Sajid's death was mourned to a significant extent by Baloch nationalists and progressives more generally, to lament the fates of Shah Daad and Ihsaan meant equivocation with the militant path the two young men had chosen. While the contemporary state still patronises militancy (or what can be termed cold wars) against other states while visiting terror upon dissidents within its own borders, for progressives to even pose rhetorical questions about the cause of young men like Shah Daad and Ihsaan turning away from the mainstream is to immediately be cast off as a supporter of 'terrorism' and 'anti-state conspiracy'.

Such accusations are certainly nothing new in Pakistan, and reflect the deep penetration of hegemonic state narratives within the body-politic, especially in the Punjabi heartland, but, no less importantly, amongst privileged allies of the establishment in Pashtun, Baloch and other social

formations.

Certainly the PTM's otherwise overtly celebrated politics of non-violence is also relentlessly pilloried by those who uncritically peddle state nationalism, including a significant element of Pashtuns that support the PTI and decry the PTM as 'anti-Pakistan'. Yet the difference between the PTM's much wider reach and the fragmentation of the Baloch national movement confirms that, for all of the slandering of the PTM that takes place alongside violence, harassment and other forms of repression, the movement has remained steadfast in its commitment to non-violence.

PTM's most mobilised and tech-savvy constituency is that of university-going Pashtuns in urban centres like Islamabad, Karachi and Peshawar. In the shape of Shah Daad and Ihsaan, this is precisely the same demographic which, in the Baloch case, is, at least in part, still drawn to militancy.

## **Of Structural and Other Violence**

For any principled supporter of the national cause, and, for that matter of the wretched of the earth more generally, the most galling aspect of the Baloch condition is the fact that the national movement – and individuals like Shah Daad and Ihsaan – bears the burden of political violence. During the heyday of decolonisation, Jean-Paul Sartre, a celebrated metropolitan philosopher, announced:

*If violence were only a thing of the future, if exploitation and oppression never existed on earth, perhaps displays of nonviolence might relieve the conflict. But if the entire regime, even your nonviolent thoughts, is governed by a thousand-year old oppression, your passiveness serves no other purpose but to put you on the side of the oppressors.*

The Baloch national movement has suffered through the worst forms of colonial state power, compelling at least a segment of the movement to pick up arms. There is, hence, no question of issuing a blanket condemnation of Baloch militancy. So long as the state continues to brutalise Baloch youth, including women, who are increasingly active in the national movement, it must be held primarily responsible for the unending cycle of violence and hate.

While I believe that non-violence as a political horizon, as means *and* end, is central to revolutionary praxis in our times [13], the present discussion is limited to the question of strategy. The PTM's ability to garner what is by any account the biggest support base of any ethnic-national movement of recent times – both amongst Pashtuns themselves as well as non-Pashtuns – is largely due to the ideational power of non-violence, particularly when seen in light of the oppressive 'War on Terror' in which both purported antagonists, state and non-state 'terrorists', brutalised ordinary people.

There should be no doubt that the military establishment – and the state's organic intellectuals in the media and educational institutions – constantly provoke the PTM so as to trigger violence. Indeed, the mainstream has repeatedly attempted to depict the PTM as championing violence in any case – the Khar Qamar killings being the most obvious example. But the failure of the state strategy, time and again, suggests that the a non-violent Baloch national movement, *in concert with the other national movements and a principled Left in central Pakistan*, could also thwart all designs to de-legitimize it.

The question of unity is essential, given the fact that the PTM has gained so much traction, in part because of the significant Pashtun component within the civil and military services, and more generally the demographic fact of Pashtuns being the second biggest ethnic group in the country. The Baloch, in comparison, comprise barely 5% of Pakistan's total population, and have miniscule

representation within the state apparatus, most notably, the army. [14]

Yet the *structural* violence visited upon the Baloch – in which colonial statecraft is grafted onto a complex of multinational and military capital – derives, in the final analysis, from the same fundamental logics of capital and colonial statecraft that cast a shadow over the Pashtun, or, for that matter, Sindhi, Gilgit-Baltistani, Kashmiri, Hazara, Siraiki and other oppressed nations. [15] The Baloch are certainly subject to the most brutal and intense forms of physical violence, intimidation and harassment, but then colonial capitalism has, since its inception, always generated difference along racial/ethnic lines – not to mention gendered ones.

It is precisely through Capital's reproduction of 'difference' – refracted through colonial statecraft – that we can only transcend to a universalist politics, or what here I have called revolutionary internationalism. In short, our horizon must be wider than simply resisting the politics of hate propagated by the state, which we often do by reciprocating hate. [16] To posit a forward-looking and constructive politics that prefigures both the political order and society we wish to build – federal, democratic, peaceful, egalitarian, sustainable, beyond toxic masculinity, caring and compassionate – is our primary challenge.

It is of course impossible to countenance such a political horizon without reckoning with historic oppressions that continue into our present. In our multi-national country, with a long history of colonial statecraft, the biggest burden of uncovering the truth falls upon the dominant nation. As suggested at the outset, principled progressives in the Punjabi heartland have tried to carry this burden, and continue to do so today. But in comparison to the heyday of revolutionary decolonisation, the challenge today is indubitably more difficult.

It is not just Punjabi progressives that confront difficulty in addressing the national question. The very fragility of the Pakistani nation-building project has engendered ethnic tensions over a considerable period of time in many different contexts. Perhaps most notable in this regard is Sindh, where Muhajirs were for a long time viewed by the indigenous population as usurpers, particularly with respect to Karachi. In recent times, Sindhi nationalist sentiment has also heightened in relation to Pashtun in-migration in the 2000s when military operations forced many Pashtuns to flee their historic abodes in Swat and the ex-FATA districts. [17] Meanwhile, latent tensions between Baloch and Pashtun communities in Balochistan, as well as the badly brutalised Hazaras in Quetta, rear their head from time to time. Over the past few years occasional sparks have also flown between Baloch and Siraiki nationalists in districts like DG Khan and Rajanpur.

In all of these cases, truth is necessary for reconciliation. As ever, it is the most conscious political element of each respective national movement that must lead the way in this regard. To build a meaningful political coalition of ethnic-nations and working people in as fractured and brutalised a context as Pakistan – in which so many ordinary working people from across ethnic-national divides feel compelled to simply follow the lead of status quo forces to navigate state and market – cannot start from a point of judgment in which any particular national movement – or left in central regions – lords over any other partner in the struggle. We must begin from a position of empathy and understanding, establishing a minimum agenda – and attendant strategies – to build a viable movement.

But to build a viable hegemonic coalition that can clearly articulate an anti-establishment politics in the mainstream like the NAP must be our horizon. Simply limiting ourselves to resisting the excess of colonial statecraft – or class exploitation or patriarchal oppression as the case may be – means that we are likely to continue preaching to the already converted. To build a hegemonic coalition – which means pulling over onto our side those who have hitherto bought into the ideology of colonialism – requires a long and conscious effort in which ordinary people, especially in the Punjabi



heartland, willingly relinquish privilege in favour of freedom and dignity for all. [18]

We find important lessons in the extremely powerful and transformative politics symbolised by a new generation of Baloch women who have emerged to lead the national struggle. Their personal sufferings, and their ability to express them, compel their male comrades in the national movement, as well as relatively privileged feminists hailing from central regions, to recognise the multiple levels of oppression that exist in colonial conditions. Their commitment to overturning all structures of power embodies the revolutionary internationalism called for in our present conjuncture. Freedom for all nations, but also social emancipation from patriarchy and class within the proverbial nation. [19]

Such a politics – and vision – cannot be confined to the nation-state boundaries of Pakistan, or, for that matter, to any other contemporary bounded state. To quote Fanon:

*[T]he building of a nation is of necessity accompanied by the discovery and encouragement of universalizing values. It is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness lives and grows. And this two-fold emergence is ultimately the heart of all culture.*

To invoke ‘culture’ for Fanon is to speak both to the particular and the universal, both the national and international, to the celebration of difference, but the transcendence of exploitation and oppression in all their forms, especially their class, racialised and gendered forms. If Pakistani progressives build the hegemonic coalition that brings together oppressed ethnic-nations, the working class movement and feminist movements and principles, their first task will be to challenge the Pakistani state’s historic enmity towards Afghanistan and India. To challenge the global-imperialised logic of capital that COVID-19 has exposed must start with the peoples of our own regions, those who, like us, have been brutalised by colonial state apparatuses and reactionary forces.

Indeed, perhaps the biggest shock that many of us are having to come to terms with is that, after years of positioning itself as an opponent of ‘globalisation’, the Left now finds itself at a crossroads where it must take up the mantle of an open and free world.

The pandemic has certainly not thrown up a sudden shift in the political mainstream: the Great Financial Crisis (GFC) that signaled the beginning of the end for the political-economic regime known as neoliberal globalisation directly led to collapse of the so-called ‘liberal centre’ in the Euro-American heartlands of the capitalist world-system. Trump, Bolsonaro, Boris Johnson and many others who have called for a repudiation of the liberal imperialism that characterised the Clinton-Blair interregnum came to power on the basis of nationalist sloganeering, even if being far more circumspect in destabilizing the complex and globalised configuration of American, British and western capital more generally.

While most of the metropolitan Left is engaged in discussion about how western societies emaciated by decades of neoliberalism can move beyond free market orthodoxy and rehabilitate egalitarian imaginaries, there has also been some recognition that a meaningful Left politics for the present and future must put the rest of the world – particularly the world’s most populous, historically imperialised zones of South Asia and Africa – front and centre. Just as in Pakistan the uneven developmental logics of colonialism continue to haunt us – in the form of a dominant (Punjabi) nation that controls the levers of state power and is the repository of capital – so the world is also indelibly shaped by the history of European colonial rule. There is no doubt that the rise of China as a world power is both cause and consequence of shifts in the global political economy, but the world’s financial centres – which suck resources and the best educated people away from the historic colonies of Europe – remain in the western heartlands of the capitalist world-system. Meanwhile,

Europe and North America still remain the major contributors to the climate crisis. A genuine revolutionary internationalism thus demands that the western Left attend to the truth of imperial past and present – and then relinquish privilege accordingly – in much the same way as it demands of the Punjabi nation to do so within the construct known as Pakistan.

In many ways, the Left everywhere was intimately connected to the struggle of national liberation movements in a bygone era. Indeed, until the 1970s, to be committed to revolutionary politics was to speak of a world free of exploitation, both within and beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. So it must be again today.

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**P.S.**

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## Footnotes

[1] Not to mention what Marxists would call 'class traitors', or men who undertake the long and humbling process of recognizing and redressing their privilege in a deeply patriarchal society. There are certainly many more sub-categories of 'progressives' beyond these.

[2] I have been privileged to struggle alongside many Punjabis subjected to horrific state repression, including Jamil Omar, Salman Haider and Mehr Abdul Sattar.

[3] The well-publicised facts of Ali Wazir's family having lost 18 members to war and terrorism speak for themselves – and bear in mind that his is a relatively privileged clan within the local context.

[4] See Muhammad Hanif's powerful recent Urdu piece on the perils of being an educated Baloch: <https://www.bbc.com/urdu/pakistan-52541262>

[5] Taha Siddiqui and Declan Walsh, "In Pakistan, Detainees Are Vanishing in Covert Jails", *New York Times*, July 25, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/26/world/asia/detainees-vanish-in-secretive-facilities-as-pakistan-fights-taliban.html>.

[6] Frantz Fanon, *Black skin, white masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 18.

[7] Aasim Sajjad Akhtar, "The Politics of Common Sense", podcast by James M. Dorsey, New

Books in Middle Eastern Studies, NBN, November 29, 2018.

<https://newbooksnetwork.com/aasim-sajjad-akhtar-the-politics-of-common-sense-state-society-and-culture-in-pakistan-cambridge-up-2018/>.

[8] The ethnic peripheries are internally differentiated. Take, for instance, the lush and relatively well-integrated Peshawar Valley in comparison to the war-ravaged tribal districts. There are further sociological faultlines within these variegated social formations that partly explain why some take on pro-establishment and others anti-establishment political positions.

[9] Nancy Fraser, "From redistribution to recognition? Dilemmas of justice in a 'post-socialist' age", *New Left Review* 212, (July/August, 1995): 68

[10] For relatively recent comparative analyses of ethnic-nationalism in Pakistan, see Farhan Hanif Siddiqi, *The politics of ethnicity in Pakistan: the Baloch, Sindhi and Mohajir ethnic movements*, (London: Routledge, 2012); and Adeel Khan, *Politics of identity: ethnic nationalism and the state in Pakistan*, (New York: Sage, 2005).

[11] I am not suggesting that Sindhi nationalists, for instance, have not been the target of the state's ire over the past two decades. They have, but the Baloch and Pashtun cases are arguably more demonstrative for the argument I am presenting here.

[12] An investigative report from a decade ago rightly called the state's coercive intrusion into Balochistan 'Pakistan's secret dirty war':

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/mar/29/balochistan-pakistans-secret-dirty-war>

[13] See the recent powerful exposition by Hurmat Ali Shah in this regard:

<https://www.himalmag.com/redefining-citizenship-in-pakistan-2020/>

[14] Pashtuns are also better integrated economically within Pakistan compared to the Baloch.

[15] If Reko Diq, Saindak and Gwadar Port are contemporary examples of multinational capital combining with the military to expropriate the Baloch nation, Thar's coal and Sindh's marine resources/oil and gas are parallel examples, just as Waziristan and other Pashtun tribal regions at the epicentre of the 'War on Terror' are pillaged for their mineral deposits.

[16] Here I am not referring only to the strategic differences between national movements on the question of violent or non-violent means to challenge state oppression, but also to the overt conflict that takes place more and more often between ethnic-nationalists, Marxists and feminists. While productive tensions are welcome, and even necessary, the 'competition of oppressions' that often plays out in digital spaces is entirely counter-productive and serves only to bolster the hegemonic triad of colonial statecraft, class exploitation and patriarchal power relations.

[17] Of the banning of JQSM-Arisar, a largely peaceful political organisation that has in recent times raised the issue of Sindhi missing persons, is obvious evidence of the state's growing intolerance towards any kind of national assertion. See

<https://www.bbc.com/urdu/pakistan-52628714>.

[18] The example of PTM is important insofar as many young Pashtuns – including those associated with nationalist parties – were either passive or even acceded to the statist/imperialist logics of the 'War on Terror' until the PTM erupted into existence, thus providing an avenue for a political position for which no organisational form previously existed (or even seemed possible).



This is both to note that revolutionary subjects cannot be willed into existence – the PTM, was, after all, a spontaneous uprising – and the fact that latent feelings can indeed be given concrete form if the political vision is articulated by a small yet politically conscious critical mass.

[19] Mahrang Baloch is one such shining example. Her recent Urdu column on the suffering of Baloch women and how to deepen the national movement is essential reading:

<https://haalhawal.com/Story/41990>