

1968, Forty Years Later: Tariq Ali Looks Back on a Pivotal Year in the Global Struggle for Social Justice

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We continue our series “1968, Forty Years Later” with the political activist, novelist and historian, Tariq Ali. Back in the 1960s, with the Vietnam War at its height, Tariq Ali earned a national reputation through debates with figures like Henry Kissinger and then-British Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart. He protested against the Vietnam War, led the now-infamous march on the American embassy in London in 1968, and edited the revolutionary paper *Black Dwarf*, where he became friends with numerous influential figures, such as Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X, John Lennon and Yoko Ono. Forty years later, Tariq Ali continues his lifelong struggle against US foreign policy across the globe. [includes rush transcript]

Tariq Ali, acclaimed British Pakistani historian, activist and commentator. He is one of the editors of the *New Left Review* and the author of a dozen books, including *Street Fighting Years: An Autobiography of the Sixties*. His forthcoming book is *The Duel: Pakistan on the Flightpath of American Power*.

RUSH TRANSCRIPT

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JUAN GONZALEZ: We turn now to the latest part of our series “1968: Forty Years Later.” For a discussion on the legacy of 1968, I’m joined by the political activist, novelist and historian, Tariq Ali. Back in the 1960s, with the Vietnam War at its height, Tariq Ali earned a national reputation through debates with figures like Henry Kissinger and then-British Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart. He protested against the Vietnam War, led the now-infamous march on the American embassy in London in 1968, and edited the revolutionary paper *Black Dwarf*, where he became friends with numerous influential figures, such as Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X, John Lennon and Yoko Ono.

Forty years later, Tariq Ali continues his lifelong struggle against US foreign policy across the globe. He has written more than a dozen books on world history and politics, as well as five novels and scripts for both stage and screen. He is currently one of the editors of *New Left Review*. His memoir is titled *Street Fighting Years: An Autobiography of the Sixties*.

Tariq Ali, welcome to Democracy Now!

TARIQ ALI: Good to be with you.

JUAN GONZALEZ: There's so many things that happened in 1968, and obviously you've had time to reflect on all of them. Talk to us first about what was going on in England at the time and your involvement in the social movements that developed at that time.

TARIQ ALI: What we had in Britain in the '60s, late '60s, was a Labour government, which had been elected. This Labour government, despite all its promises, had decided to carry on backing US foreign policy, and the war in Vietnam was at its height. And the government, to our anger, decided to support the war in Vietnam. So there was a wave of anger amongst Labour supporters, who said this is not on. And we then set up the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, though it has to be said, Juan, in retrospect, that that Labour government resisted heavy US pressure to send troops to Vietnam. They backed it verbally, but neither Britain nor any other Western European state sent troops to Vietnam, unlike Iraq. So even though they backed it, it was very different. And the United States embassy—

JUAN GONZALEZ: The only troops, I think, that were sent by other countries were South Korea, Australia, some of the—

TARIQ ALI: South Korea and Australia, always there. But no European country sent troops to fight in Vietnam. Very interesting when you think back on that. It was the height of the Cold War. You would have thought they would, but they didn't.

And so, a big movement grew, demanding dissociation from the war in Vietnam and for Britain to withdraw political support. And this became a very large movement and backed by virtually every serious political figure in Britain at the time, apart from the government. We had lots of Labour members of Parliament who were opposed to the war, rock singers coming on demonstrations, Mick Jagger writing "Street Fighting Man," numerous other people involved in it. And the fact that this was Britain's closest ally in Europe made it a problem.

And I remember Senator Eugene McCarthy, the Democrat peace candidate, saying publicly, "What is our country coming to, when our embassy in the friendliest country we have in the world is permanently under siege?" That cheered us up enormously, because it meant that we were having an impact.

JUAN GONZALEZ: And the protest at the US embassy that you were involved in?

TARIQ ALI: Well, you know, this was after the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, where the Vietnamese had taken the US embassy in Saigon for a token period. They had all been killed. I guess you could call it a suicide attack, using today's language.

And so, we thought, what can we do to show solidarity with the Vietnamese? Can't we just capture the embassy for a short time and run the Vietnamese flag up and then withdraw? And in October '67, we got very close to doing that. And we were surprised, as well, and so were the people in the embassy. So we thought, in March '68, we would do that. But this time, everyone was prepared, and the police, mounted police, charged us and prevented us from reaching the embassy, so there was a big clash. And then Mick Jagger said, "Well, you know, it's obvious what we have now got to do. We've got to have our own cavalry. So why don't we train people to fight on horseback against the mounted police?" But we thought that we'd give this one a miss. So that was the big clashes outside Grosvenor Square, which stunned the country, actually, because they weren't prepared for that. But it showed the depth of feeling. And then, a few months later,

France exploded in May-June, with ten million workers on strike, which just shifted the whole political locus or focus of the struggle to something completely different, that something which had begun as an antiwar movement was now becoming a deeper social movement.

JUAN GONZALEZ: And the French convulsion, of course, didn't actually start in Paris, as you mention in an article you recently did at the Guardian. It started at a smaller university outside of Paris, and it started in March, right? Could you tell—

TARIQ ALI: It started on March the—

JUAN GONZALEZ: —for a lot of our younger listeners and viewers, some of that history of that amazing movement, how a few students ended up leading a movement that paralyzed the nation?

TARIQ ALI: It's quite astonishing when you think back on it. On March the 22nd in a campus in Nanterre outside Paris, students came out to protest against the restrictions, against bad housing conditions, and the government overreacted, beat them up. They set up the March the 22nd Committee, which called demonstrations in the heart of the Latin Quarter, and that quarter exploded on the night of May the 10th.

Two months later, the campaign erupted with massive clashes. And, you know, the French have this magical capacity to erect barricades. Historically, from the eighteenth century onwards, they've been very good at doing barricades. It's almost genetic now. And so, they put up the barricades in May, and the country was on the—completely divided.

The students were then joined by workers. There were factory strikes. And soon, by the beginning of June, you had ten million workers on strike, many of them occupying their factories and wanting to run society. And you had Jean-Paul Sartre, the great French philosopher, congratulating the students and workers and saying, "You have put imagination on the seat of power." So that French upheaval transformed the mode all over Europe, without any doubt, and people were scared.

JUAN GONZALEZ: And how did the students build that kind of alliance with the labor movement? And how did it spread beyond just the students to the labor movement?

TARIQ ALI: I think when workers saw students fighting on the barricades, the effect of that was exemplary. It's just like the students had seen the Vietnamese fighting in Saigon; that had got them going. So the Latin Quarter in the heart of Paris was, when it was under student control, was renamed the Heroic Vietnam Quarter. And when workers saw students fighting on the barricades, they said, "Hey, hang on a minute. You know, these namby-pamby kids are taking on the state. We suffer much more than they do." And slowly, delegations of young workers started coming from the car factories, from other factors, and joining students. Very funny story, when building workers suddenly came and said, "Hang on. We can show you how to build better barricades," and immediately barricades went up. So this exemplary effect then went into the factories, and the trade union leaders, which were communist, all of them, were completely thrown by this and couldn't control the workers at all, and the workers occupied.

JUAN GONZALEZ: And the impact of that movement on the social conditions of the people in France, because obviously Charles de Gaulle, the World War II hero, was the president at the time, and the impact on the government and what kinds of reforms emerged from there?

TARIQ ALI: Well, the government panicked. Charles de Gaulle, in a very rare outburst of anger, because normally he was very lofty, but when he found out what was going on in his country, he said, "Chie-en-lit"—it's "[expletive] in the bed." And the students then put up a poster with de

Gaulle, saying, "No, you are the chienlit," which went all over the streets of Paris. But de Gaulle panicked. During the general strike in France, he panicked.

He went secretly to address French troops stationed in Baden-Baden in Germany and said to them, "If Paris falls, will you help me to retake it?" And the army—the general said, "We will, provided you release the generals who were involved in the Algerian coup," total sort of right-wing generals. And de Gaulle made the deal. Never came to that, thank God, because there would have been massive bloodshed. So it didn't come to that, but that's how scared they were.

And you had French journalists traveling Europe and being asked, "Do you think the disease will spread? How serious is it?" because the entire rulers of Western Europe became very nervous.

JUAN GONZALEZ: And again, what kind of impact was there on French society, in terms of the conditions of workers and students following that?

TARIQ ALI: Well, I mean, the impact was that they won massive reforms. You know, the government which came after de Gaulle, Pompidou, actually made a lot of concessions in levels of wages, working conditions, the conditions inside universities. So, in order to prevent revolution, they acceded to a great deal of the workers' demands. In some factories, trade union bureaucrats would go to the factory and say to the workers, "Guys, we've won a 25 percent wage increase," and they'd say, "Screw it." "And what do you want?" "We want the factory."

JUAN GONZALEZ: And what most people don't realize, I think, is that, the past forty years, the ruling classes of France have been trying to take back all of the reforms that were achieved in that short period of time back then, and the French working class has always been considered the most pampered by capitalists of Europe, in terms of their general conditions.

TARIQ ALI: They are. And the current president, Nicolas Sarkozy, came to power saying, "My victory shows the death of May '68 and that legacy in France, and I will destroy it forever." Well, exactly the opposite is happening. His ratings, a year after he was elected, are now rock-bottom. He's a disliked president, even more unpopular than Chirac. Even as we speak, there are public-sector strikes taking place in France.

JUAN GONZALEZ: I'd like to move on to Czechoslovakia, also 1968. Certainly, what was happening in France had an impact as well on what happened in Czechoslovakia and in the confrontations with the Soviet Union.

TARIQ ALI: You know, Juan, I always felt that in some ways what happened in Czechoslovakia offered a great deal of hope, because here you had a reformist faction inside the Czech Communist Party trying to make Czechoslovakia a socialist democracy. Dubcek, the leader of the reform communists, said, "We want socialism with a human face."

And that socialism with a human face had already led to the most amazing discussions in the Czech press and Czech television, which became the freest in Europe, even though it was state-owned. Journalists took control, and the newspapers and television were transformed. Political prisoners could confront their jailers on prime-time television and say, "Why did you torture us? Why did you say this?" So the whole country was politicized.

And then, fearful that this particular disease might spread to Russia and Eastern Europe—and there was every chance it might have—the Russians sent in the tanks. And the response of NATO was not so critical, if you look at what—

JUAN GONZALEZ: And they sent in the tanks around—in what month again?

TARIQ ALI: August.

JUAN GONZALEZ: August.

TARIQ ALI: It was the 21st of August, 1968. The Russians and the Warsaw Pact powers sent in the tanks to crush the Czech experiment. And by doing so, they didn't know it, but they signed their own death warrant, because, interestingly enough, people like Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the Nobel Prize Russian novelist who wrote the famous books on the gulag, he was asked, "When did you lose faith totally in your own country and its capacity to reform from within?" and Solzhenitsyn said, "21st of August, 1968. When they stopped the Czechs from doing what they wanted and transforming the system, then I knew it was the end, and I lost all faith in this regime." Interesting.

But the response of the West was very mild, because they were not happy with the socialism with a human face either. But if the Czechs had won, who knows? The history of Europe might have been very different, because you never had a socialist government which was also democratic. And here, there was a possibility that the two could come together, and that would have given a very different shape to the world in Europe and elsewhere.

JUAN GONZALEZ: We're talking to Tariq Ali, the political activist, novelist and historian. His memoir is called *Street Fighting Years: An Autobiography of the Sixties*. We'll be back with him in a minute. Stay with us.

[break]

JUAN GONZALEZ: We're talking to Tariq Ali, the political activist, novelist and historian. His memoir is called *Street Fighting Years: An Autobiography of the Sixties*. He has a big article in the *Guardian* of London called "Where Has All the Rage Gone?" about 1968. [1]We've been talking about England, France, Czechoslovakia, where the fermenting in Europe in 1968, but it wasn't just in Europe or in North America. There were widespread movements, amazing movements, in other parts of the third world at the same time. And those have gotten far less attention in many of the retrospectives about what's been going on.

TARIQ ALI: I know. It's really awful, that, actually. It shows the sort of nostalgia side of it. People only want to remember what they remembered at the time. But I think the two big events in the third world, one was the Mexican students' uprising at the—it was Olympics year, don't forget. And the Mexican students fought for democracy in their own country against an oppressive semi-one-party state regime. And the Mexican authorities decided to massacre them. There was a gigantic massacre by the Mexican regime. You know, hundreds of students were killed, thousands were wounded. And at the same time, the Olympics were about to take place. No one at that time in the West said, "Let's boycott the Olympics," by the way.

JUAN GONZALEZ: Yes. And in terms of some of the issues that they were raising at the time in Mexico?

TARIQ ALI: The issues they were raising were social justice, democracy, democratic rights, an end to an authoritarian, corrupt one-party state government. That is what the Mexican students were demanding, and they were mown down. And the most striking image that came out of the Olympics was the two black US athletes who had won the gold—the runners who had won the gold and silver medals, when they went to the podium. I mean, it was a moment of real pride and internationalism that, in solidarity with the students, they had their medals, and they stood with their heads hanging down and raised their fists to give the clenched fist salute, a very moving event which was seen all over the third world as a sign of solidarity with that world by Afro-American athletes.

JUAN GONZALEZ: And, of course, in Mexico itself, the achieving justice or rectifying what happened back then is still a political battle that's ongoing in a series of Mexican governments since then.

TARIQ ALI: It has been ongoing, and it's still ongoing, because in the last Mexican elections, as anyone who followed them closely knows, Juan, they tricked—they tricked the electorate once again. They rigged the elections, not as massively as they used to do in the past, but sufficiently to deny López Obrador the presidency. The Obrador campaign, election campaign, in Mexico mobilized more people than any other campaign they'd done, literally a million people in the Zócolo, in the heart of Mexico City. And then they say he didn't—and this was the case in most parts of the country. Everyone thought he was going to win. But suddenly, at the last moment, they rigged the elections, and all the people who accuse Chavez in Venezuela of all sorts of crimes and send hundreds of observers to watch every move were not present when the pro-Western government in Mexico was rigging the elections against López Obrador.

JUAN GONZALEZ: Then, of course, the events in your own homeland, which are perhaps the least covered or remembered of all the major upheavals of 1968.

TARIQ ALI: You know, people sometimes get surprised when they ask me, "Well, we know about '68, but we lost everywhere. We fought, and we lost." And I say, hang on a minute. There's one country where they fought for three months, the students in Pakistan, against a military dictatorship. And the struggle began on November the 7th, 1968, went on 'til March the 10th, 1969.

And if you look at the chronology of that struggle, Juan, it gets bigger and bigger and bigger. Workers join, white-collar workers join, lawyers join, women join, judges come out on the streets, prostitutes get organized and come out. It became a massive social struggle. And every day, the number of people getting killed gets bigger and bigger and bigger. We still don't have accurate figures of how many people the police and army shot dead in Pakistan.

But finally, when railway workers began to disrupt the railways, taking out the railway lines from the track, and the demand was very simple: end of dictatorship, and democratic free elections in the country. These were the two central demands. But the military dictator of the time, Field Marshal Ayub Khan, backed by Washington and London, was standing firm, 'til he realized he couldn't carry on. And in March, he was toppled. And I remember—

JUAN GONZALEZ: Why was he so backed by Washington and London?

TARIQ ALI: Well, because Washington, in Pakistan, have always preferred to rule via the military than through civilian politicians. They don't trust the civilian politicians too much. So all the three key dictators Pakistan have had had been backed by Washington. And in fact, Ayub was put into power by Washington in October '58. So after ten years, the students—he was removed. It was an insurrection, and he had to go.

And I was in the country at the time, and the mood was just exhilarating, euphoria, you know, people celebrating on the streets, hugging each other, distributing sweets. And religion played no part in the struggle at all. It was a totally secular struggle. And the three big demands of the movement, social demands of the movement, were food, clothes and shelter for all.

JUAN GONZALEZ: You also talk about the enormous development of a feminist movement at that time, which most people, when you're dealing with the Muslim world, would not even envision that. But as far back as '68, there was a strong feminist movement there.

TARIQ ALI: There was a strong women's organizations in both parts of Pakistan, as it was then. And one of the most moving things was when a student was killed in the western part of the country, in the eastern part of the country, which later became Bangladesh, women would just pour out onto the streets, very few with their heads covered, but barefooted in mourning and in solidarity with what was happening to students in West Pakistan.

But the feminist movement, you know, it's often forgotten: why was it called the women's "liberation" movement? The word "liberation" came from Vietnam. The National Liberation Front of Vietnam was fighting for its freedom; we should fight for our freedom. Gay liberation movement, women's liberation movement, black liberation movement were inspired by all those struggles.

And I guess, of what survives from that, in terms of the legacy, the biggest gains were probably made on that front, social and sexual front. Women's rights were won, the right of women to have abortions, the ending of illegalizing abortions, homosexuality, which was totally crushed. People now forget, because so much has changed on that front, that in countries like Britain, in the late '50s and '60s, early '60s, it was illegal to be gay. Illegal. You were arrested if you were found out. I have many friends who were locked up. Now, young people can hardly believe that. So the '68 movement was a political, social, and movement for sexual liberation, which shouldn't be forgotten. A lot of the rights being enjoyed by women and gay people today come from that movement.

JUAN GONZALEZ: And yet, as you say, religion played no part in that movement, and yet now religion plays such a huge part in the daily life and the political life of Pakistan today. What was the transformation that has occurred?

TARIQ ALI: You know, I challenge that, actually. I think what—the last general elections in Pakistan, the religious parties were virtually wiped out electorally. It is true that there is much more religiosity on Pakistan, but there is in virtually all parts of the world, including this country. But in terms of the religious parties actually dominating Pakistan, this is not true, or the notion that Pakistan is on the eve of a Jihadi takeover and the Jihadi finger on the nuclear trigger.

I've just written a long a book on Pakistan, which will be published in September, in which I actually challenge all these mythologies and ask why are they being created and what is the function of it. The bulk of the country isn't attracted to either Jihadi or religious politics. These are a tiny, tiny minority in Pakistan. The real problems of people in that country are food, clothing, shelter, education. And no political party or the military are interested in solving them. The surprise is, for me, that more people don't move towards religion. But they don't.

JUAN GONZALEZ: So where has the rage gone, as you've asked in your article? And why there is so little of that kind of rage that erupted in a short period in the late '60s and early '70s?

TARIQ ALI: Well, I think it was a different period. That was an epoch of wars, of revolutions. Don't forget, a lot of revolutions had taken place. I mean, the Cuban revolution had happened in 1959. So the mood was very different, whereas what we are witnessing now is essentially the attempts to revive a movement after massive defeats.

So the demonstrations against the war in Iraq in 2003 were gigantic, much larger than anything that happened in the '60s, both the United States and in Europe. Gigantic. But it was a spasm. It happened, and then it disappeared. And it was as if millions of ordinary citizens were coming out to tell their politicians, "You're lying. We know you're lying. Don't force us into this war." But once the war happened and Iraq was occupied, through demoralization, depression, a sense of powerlessness, they retreated. Whereas in '68 the movement grew slowly and built up to a peak, here the movement peaked to try and stop a war, and then it disappeared.

JUAN GONZALEZ: Well, you mention the massive protest in 2002, 2003. We also had, in this country, massive protests just a year or two ago of unprecedented protest of immigrants in the country—

TARIQ ALI: Yeah.

JUAN GONZALEZ: —over attempts to recruit much more draconian laws against immigrants. Yet, again, that movement too rose and then dissipated, and there hasn't been any significant continuity. Could it be that part of the problem is that there's been much less emphasis on the need for strong radical and revolutionary organizations to move from one massive uprising to another to be able to provide some kind of accumulated strength to the progressive movement?

TARIQ ALI: Well. I think that is a part of the problem, is that there is no political organization, radical or otherwise, which can actually take these movements forward, except in Latin America, Juan, where country after country, you have giant social movements in Latin America. And then the result in Venezuela, in Bolivia, in Ecuador and now in Paraguay, of all places, is victories for people attached to these movements. So, Latin America, I argue, is one of the few places where there is hope. But in the rest of the world, movements rise and fall.

I mean, we could say, in a way, that an unusual development in Western politics is the size of audiences which Barack Obama is getting. He has energized youth in a way that they weren't energized before. And it's foolish and sectarian to say, but it's the Democrats. Yeah, it is, but that's not the interesting thing. The interesting thing is that a young generation has become attracted to politics again. The question is, will it remain so if the Democrats win? But it's an interesting phenomenon.

JUAN GONZALEZ: Or—but then the issue is, are they attached to normal Democratic party politics, or are they attached to some kind of a real—a potential social movement? That's the big issue is, in terms of the presidential race.

TARIQ ALI: Well, it's—you know, the strength of this campaign for Obama has been that people think he is offering something different, that this will mark a break. And, of course, on one level, his race, it will mark a phenomenal break if he's elected. But whether it will on other things, of course, remains to be seen. If he wins, my advice to everyone here is to be at the celebrations in Washington with banners saying "Pull out of Iraq now," is to make it a big antiwar moment, because since he's used his opposition to the war in Iraq in this campaign, one shouldn't stay aloof from this movement, but find ways of intervening in it.

JUAN GONZALEZ: And in Europe today and in Britain, what are the expectations of these presidential elections?

TARIQ ALI: In Europe, well, it varies from place to place. I mean, I think, for instance, in Italy, which has just had a big victory of the right, they will find it awkward, because it's a very racist government now in Italy. Juan, I don't know whether people here follow it, but 68 percent of Italians want all the gypsies, the traveling people, expelled from the country, forgetting that they too were victims of the Third Reich and were wiped out in the Second World War. So if America elects a black president, I think a lot of Italian right-wingers will be slightly disconcerted, saying "Oh, but these are the sort of people we are trying to get rid of from our country."

In Britain, they are prepared to go along with anyone Washington elects, both political parties, New Labour and Conservative. So they are not bothered. Their position will be support the White House, whoever's there. If Obama changes some things, they'll go along with that. They are not going to

fight.

But Europe, of course, is watching this quite keenly, because in Germany, for instance, and other places, you have politicians who have been incredibly upset by the Iraq business and now Afghanistan, where they see no hope at all. So they are hoping that there will be a change of regime, which will pull out and allow the Western world to breathe again without occupying countries. But, you know, that may be a hope which might not be fulfilled, but we'll see.

JUAN GONZALEZ: Well, I want to thank you very much for being with us, Tariq Ali. You're going to be speaking tomorrow night, May 30th, at 7:30 at the Baruch Performing Arts Center in a public forum on "The New Imperialism: Old Problems and New Challenges." Thanks again for being with us.

TARIQ ALI: Thank you very much.

JUAN GONZALEZ: Tariq Ali, political activist, novelist and historian. *An Autobiography of the Sixties* is his book. He's speaking tomorrow at the Baruch Performing Arts Center here in New York.

P.S.

* From Democracy Now:

http://www.democracynow.org/2008/5/29/1968_40_years_later_tariq_ali

Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF website: [May '68: Where has all the rage gone?](#) and [1968 Revisited: Storming Heaven](#)