

# **Pakistan Eyewitness Report: GPO 150 And The Spirit Of March 15**

Tuesday 17 March 2009, by [JAN Ammar Ali](#) (Date first published: 16 March 2009).

**Lahore:** We all are ecstatic about what happened in Lahore on the March 15, 2009. This day will be remembered as one where the power of State seemed helpless in front of the power of the street. The most crucial moment during the day was the battle at the GPO chowk that galvanized the entire city into action. The scene of almost 150 people battling a repressive police and forcing it to retreat will remain in the collective memory of our nation for a very long time to come.

I happened to be part of that "GPO 150" when the police started using tear-gas. Here is a short description of how we managed to reach the spot and how we were able to inflict defeat on the State apparatus.

## **Beating the checkpoints**

We had left Zaman park where Aitzaz had been placed under house arrest. Lahore had the look of a deserted ghost town in the morning with the Mall road completely blocked. I was with the Labour Party Pakistan, Student Action Committee and civil society members. We decided to walk our way towards the High Court in pairs so that the police would fail to notice us. Some of us succeeded while others, like Nauman Qaiser [1], were arrested at the checkpoints. We saw civil society activists Feryal Gauhar and Hina Jilani once we reached the GPO chowk.

*"As the police started shelling tear-gas indiscriminately, many activists started falling unconscious. All of us panicked and started fleeing the scene to evade arrests. A man who must be in his 70s, started yelling to the fleeing crowd (which included me, as I could no longer breathe) that this was not a time to run but to fight. Eventually, the baba ji fainted as well but he encouraged all of us to come back and continue the fight."*

I have been to many protests in the past but I have never seen anything like the passion visible in front of the High Court. There was a consensus that if the Lahore High Court falls, the movement will fizzle out. Everyone knew that the police would use the most brutal measures to suppress the will of the people and were mentally prepared for an epic battle.

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## **Two-hour battle**

We resisted the police for over two hours, pushing them back many a times. Express News reported that 250 to 300 shells had been fired at the protestors. Express news reporter Rabia Mehmood and AAG channel correspondent Mani almost fainted and had to be taken away from the scene. Many were vomiting because of chemicals in the tear-gas which were worse than anything I have

witnessed. However, this brought the best out of the Pakistani nation. Some people were carrying salt and water for those getting injured in the fighting. Others were helping carrying people to the diagnostic center in the High Court or on to Edhi ambulances. I was about to faint a couple of times and was almost blinded by the gas before some random people gave me enough water and salt.

My friend Murtaza Khwaja (who was taking part in a violent protest for the first time) showed immense courage and we stayed on the front line throughout this epic battle. The protestors were also fighting with a spontaneous strategy that proved to be very effective. We had split in three groups. One on the Mall road, one towards the left of the GPO while one group stayed inside the High Court building. When the police would charge protestors on one side, they would be pelted by stones from the other side. This was the key to this street battle as the police was being hit by stones from three sides which is why they could not takeover the High Court. It didn't matter which political party or group one belonged to. Everyone was looking out for each other and we all wanted to win.

By this time, a lot of lawyers, political activists and civil society members had gathered at the gates and those of us who had been there since almost 12pm decided to leave as we felt dehydrated and could not breathe properly. When we went in the courtyard where all the activists had gathered (including Justice Tariq Mehmood, Advocate Anwar Kamal, Hina Jila, Tehmina Daultana etc), we had no idea what this battle at the GPO really meant. We were just looking for water and a place to sit. In fact, I was a little disappointed that the numbers in front of the GPO had not been big and that the Long March could be a failure.

It is here that we received the news that this battle had gripped the entire country's imagination. The news channels were constantly talking about the police high-handedness and the resistance by many activists. I even received a call from a friend in Karachi who said that he had read about the crazy fighting at the Lahore High Court. The tide was definitely turning.

### **People control the city**

After this, the people were in complete control of the city. Thousands joined Nawaz Sharif's caravan as he defied detention orders to lead the procession from his house in Model Town. The High Court courtyard went ecstatic when we heard the news of the resignations of the IG, DIG, SP, DCO and deputy attorney general of Pakistan. Crowds cheered wildly as some of these gentlemen joined us at the High Court. The most memorable part of the evening for me was when Aitzaz Ahsan defiantly entered the High Court building despite orders for his house arrest and the police officers stood in line to salute him. This meant a complete victory for the movement and from their onwards, it was just a matter of time before the government would be forced to accept our demands.

I feel that the way Taseer's goons were defeated at the GPO showed the weakness of this state apparatus. It represented the best of Pakistan. On one side, it represented despair, state brutality and police repression. On the other, it reflected hope, resistance, the passions and the dreams of many Pakistanis. We had won not because of the generosity of the country's leadership, but because of the countless sacrifices of lawyers and activists for the past 2 years with 15<sup>th</sup> March 2009 becoming the grand finale in Lahore.

Here, I want to thank those comrades who stood their ground at the GPO Chowk and showed Pakistan why should we be fighting this system. I will remember their support and courage for the rest of my life. This is the courage, confidence and spirit of sacrifice that we need if we want to continue our fight against the capitalist system. This has given us new confidence in our own ability to fight and in the revolutionary potential of our nation. Despite this success, our post-colonial state is still full of problems and oppression and there will inevitably be more resistance. In all of the

future struggles, we shall remember and take with us the spirit of March 15.

**P.S.** I had always been embarrassed about the fact that Punjabis have shown the least amount of resistance to the establishment. Our brothers and sisters from the smaller provinces have been at the forefront of the anti-establishment struggle and have rightly accused the Punjabi leadership of making compromises. I hope our performance in Lahore and generally during the lawyers movement will also help enhance the image of Punjabis as people who can take a stand and fight the tyranny of an oppressor even if he is Punjabi (Like Salman taseer).

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**P.S.**

\* Circulated on SPN email list and posted on ASAP website. Ammar Jan Ali, Youth Secretary of the Labour Party Pakistan Lahore (LPP), will be one of several international at the the World at a Crossroads conference in Sydney, Australia, April 10-12. For more information, or to book tickets, visit <http://www.worldatacrossroads.org>

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## Footnotes

[1] I first wrote here that Jalees Hazir was among those arrested at a checkpoint. This is what I had heard on that day. Later I found out that he had reached the GPO before we had and was arrested while resisting police brutality. The error is regretted.