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Conscientious objection: Amnesty International persists in suppressing dissent

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On February 7, 2010 Gita Sahgal, head of Amnesty International's Gender Unit, was suspended from her job. This was hours after the publication of an article in The Sunday Times, UK, where she made public her concerns about Amnesty International's legitimisation of Moazzam Begg, a former Guantanamo Bay detainee, as a human rights defender.

This is not the first time that Amnesty International's policies towards fundamentalists have been confronted from within and this is not the first time that AI has taken action, drastic action, against those who dare to voice their dissent, even if internally, about such policies. But it is the first time that AI has had to face a public debate on the issue - something that it is still trying to avoid. Human rights activists must realise that this is a crucial issue and push for a public debate. Gita Sahgal, the head of the Gender Unit, put her job at risk to stop AI from burying it. Let her sacrifice not be in vain.

Till Gita Sahgal talked to the media, internal protests within AI by staff and/or long-standing activists were reduced to silence: out of consideration for AI's reputation, wanting to 'protect' the organisation, and discipline within it, staff and activists allowed their concerns to be dismissed as irrelevant. Till Gita Sahgal went public, our repeated requests - from outside the organisation - for re-examination of these policies were simply ignored.

I can testify to the fact that over the past 25 years I have talked to various senior staff members of Amnesty International. I have talked to them about the imbalance in their reports on Algeria; about the way they constructed fundamentalists solely as victims of state repression and not as perpetrators of violence and violations against people in general and women in particular; about the way victims of fundamentalists were ignored and not defended; about the way supporters of fundamentalists were invited to AI functions as victims of state repression and then used this platform not just to denounce violations that were committed against them but to voice their political analysis of the situation; about the way the defence lawyer of fundamentalists belonging to the FIS (Islamic Salvation Front) in Algeria was repeatedly invited to AI's functions and introduced as 'a human rights lawyer' without any reference to the fact that he was not defending their victims; about the fact that AI induced a hierarchy among victims, in which fundamentalists were privileged as victims of the state while women, the vast majority of whom were victims of the fundamentalists, disappeared from the scene; about the fact that AI also induced a hierarchy of rights, in which minority rights, cultural rights, religious rights (and fundamentalist interpretations of these rights were accepted) came first and women's rights came last...

I urge readers to judge for themselves by looking at AI's annual reports on Algeria during the 'dark decade' of the 1990s and comparing the number of pages that are devoted to crimes and violations committed by the Algerian state and those devoted to crimes and violations committed by armed fundamentalist groups against the civilian population. Contrast this with the 'Shadow Report on Algeria' submitted to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) by the International Women's Human Rights Law Clinic and Women Living Under Muslim Laws

(WLUML) in January 1999 (published by WLUML in 2000).

I was not alone in denouncing AI's political positions. I personally know many other people who did. But our words were not recorded and past experience leads me to believe that most of those whom I spoke to would today deny that we ever had any such exchanges.

However, there are some instances when AI cannot deny that it was made aware, either publicly or in writing, of the demands for accountability regarding its relationship with and political support to fundamentalists. These instances should be officially recorded in their own files. I also know of a few instances wherein questioning the organisation's policy was punished by internal trial and even exclusion. One such instance, described below, was fortunately fully documented.

The war against civilians in Algeria is a textbook case: women and democrats (i.e. those who support democracy as opposed to those who support theocracy) repeatedly alerted AI to the expansion of fundamentalist forces in Algeria and their violence against people in general and women in particular, which grew rapidly after independence in 1962. These alerts went unheeded.

Here is a brief account of the local situation.

As far back as the 1960s armed groups in Algeria were attacking quarries to procure explosives and army barracks to procure arms. Throughout the 1970s and the 1980s fundamentalist pressure on people increased: The first targeted assassination was that of a gay poet. Violent groups prevented women factory workers from entering their workplace for three weeks, stoning them on their way to the plant: they had to be given army protection to enable them to return to work. A leftist student was beheaded by a fundamentalist self-appointed tribunal sitting within the premises of Algiers University. Female students were forced to observe a curfew in students' hostels as groups of young fundamentalists closed and manned the gates. Veiling was enforced on women; the so-called Islamic veil (unknown to us before it was imported from Iran in the 1970s!) was freely distributed by fundamentalist groups. Women and girls were beaten up in the streets if they dared talk back to a man insulting them. Girls had acid thrown on them for 'un-Islamic' behaviour or dress. And so on...

In the late 1980s and early 1990s fundamentalist troops occupied the public space, streets and squares. They claimed that democracy was kufr (sin of unbelief, infidelism), that if they had the law of god, they did not need the law of the people - and consequently that unbelievers (i.e. those who believed in democracy) were to be killed.

Throughout the 1990s the fundamentalists put their beliefs into practice: it is estimated that there were 2,00,000 victims during this period. Among them were numerous women who were mutilated, killed, beheaded, slit, burnt, raped, taken to the fundamentalists' camps to serve as domestic and sex slaves.

Armed fundamentalist groups posted on the doors of mosques the names of targeted individuals against whom combatants were to take action. They then issued press releases announcing in advance which specific category of people they would kill (they used the term 'execute', for they claimed to be both judges and executioners): 'journalists', 'artists', 'intellectuals', 'foreigners', 'women'... They did in fact implement their plans as announced and went on to publicly claim responsibility for the murders and assassinations they had perpetrated.

And in the last stage they massacred almost the entire population in targeted villages. Villagers who survived identified the killers as FIS leaders who had joined the GIA (Armed Islamic Group). For a graphic account of this period, see: www.sabrang.com/cc/comold/april98/world.htm.

In spite of these startling facts and ignoring direct testimonies, Amnesty International went on to

launch its campaign, 'Who kills in Algeria?', which implicitly implicated the state as perpetrator of the village massacres and exonerated the armed fundamentalist groups from their responsibility, which had been well documented locally by independent journalists and human rights activists.

It would be hard to pretend that those who executed victims, or those who condoned, those who sponsored and those who propagated the philosophy that justified this, were human rights defenders.

However, despite our repeated warnings, AI's exclusive focus on state responsibility and accountability was instrumental in promoting worldwide the image of Algerian armed fundamentalist groups mainly as victims of state repression and not - or disproportionately little, given the magnitude of their crimes - as perpetrators of violence. By highlighting in its reports the state repression against fundamentalists, and grossly underestimating the crimes the fundamentalists had committed against the population in general and against women in particular, AI as well as other mainstream international human rights organisations participated in destabilising our corrupt and repressive but still republican state (in the original sense i.e. standing for a republic and a democratic system) - at the risk of promoting the empowerment of a much more repressive, much more anti-human rights and anti-women's rights Taliban-like theocracy.

In effect, the European Left and human rights organisations, including AI, promoted the fundamentalists as democrats fighting for elections although they had clearly stated that they would end democracy and there would be no more elections if they came to power. Thus one repressive regime was being denounced on the one hand while on the other the politics of those who were their targets were being effectively sanitised.

Is this any different from what is happening in Afghanistan at the moment? When Moazzam Begg - a man who by his own admission believes that the Taliban are the best thing to have happened to Afghanistan - is supported by AI in a big way, far beyond the defence of his fundamental rights not to be tortured and illegally detained, what is being sacrificed on the altar of his freedom of opinion if not women's fundamental rights?

Can the demand that women be secluded, forbidden to learn or to work under the Taliban, and that democrats, secularists and religious minorities be physically eliminated, be considered an 'opinion' at all? Is it not hate speech? Can a human rights organisation promote - in any way - anyone who publicly supports political movements holding these 'opinions'?

Deeply disturbed by this situation, in the late 1990s the three founding members of AI in Algeria wrote a personal letter to AI's general secretary. In this letter, they first remind him that they are faithful members of the organisation: they introduce themselves as the "founding member, member of the executive bureau, coordinators and members of group 1 of the Algerian section of AI". They also indicate that they are merely sending "some observations" in their "personal capacity". The "observations" are made with respect to the "new Report on Algeria published by the organisation" as well as the "press release that announced the publication of the report".

Their first observation is that: "This press release, which is aimed at informing large audiences nationally and internationally, clearly shows an unbalance in presenting the document itself."

The three founding members then go on to spell out the reason for the unbalance: By "giving more space to some parts (state responsibility) and keeping silent about other parts (the action of armed terrorist opposition groups), this press release shows a lack of objectivity on the part of AI in its appreciation of the wave of violence that is shaking Algeria". And they conclude that "this press release only reinforces the emphasis already existing in the report, of condemning one of the parties

in conflict". They appeal to AI's principle that "partisan interpretations" should be avoided. They too, like Gita Sahgal, point at "the devastating effect that this press release had on public opinion in Algeria, including among those who till then were strong supporters of AI". They conclude: "We feel compelled to inform you of the damaging consequences for the movement as well as for the struggle against violations of human rights that we have been waging till today in our country."

These are the very words that Gita Sahgal used when she spoke to The Sunday Times.

One would have expected a letter of this nature to have initiated a discussion on the burning issue of AI's support to Algerian fundamentalists. But this is not what happened. For having written this private letter to Amnesty International's general secretary, the three members of AI in Algeria were simply expelled from the organisation without a word of comment on the issue their letter had raised. Nor did they receive a word of thanks for their years of dedicated work for the organisation.

Being loyal to the organisation, they remained silent and did not publicly expose AI's inappropriate reaction to their freedom of thought, freedom of speech and freedom of conscience.

Amnesty International now pretends that it only suspended Gita Sahgal for going public. But the three Algerians had been repressed merely for voicing internal dissent. And I know of other cases in which internal dissent has been heavily sanctioned.

What Amnesty International really does not allow one to see clearly or to expose is that beyond its stated mandate of defending fundamental human rights for all, including criminals (a mandate fully supported by Gita Sahgal, by the three founding members of AI in Algeria and by me), the selection process according to which it decides whom to defend and whom not to defend and the extension of the mandate to the point of providing fundamentalists with a political platform - all amounts to taking a political stand.

Today, with Moazzam Begg being taken around (even to 10 Downing Street) by senior staff of AI London, with chats being organised so that he can dialogue with AI's unfortunate human rights activists, with his being invited to participate in the annual general meeting of Amnesty International's USA section, we see again, on an even bigger scale, the kind of political platform and legitimacy that was given to Algerian fascist fundamentalists.

This is definitely not what we understand by the defence of fundamental human rights.

It is high time that AI accepted a public debate on this issue. It cannot be avoided any longer.

It is also time for other human rights organisations to reconsider their positions vis-à-vis fundamentalists, as Amnesty International is far from being the only one to play this unholy game.

Thanks to Gita Sahgal's courageous and principled action women human rights defenders will not be silenced any more.

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P.S.

* Source : Communalism Combat, March 2010, Year 16 No.149:

<http://www.sabrang.com/cc/archive/2010/mar10/humanrights1.html>

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