

After the Karachi WSF: The way ahead

Friday 14 April 2006, by [SUBOHI Afshan](#) (Date first published: 2 April 2006).

The six-day World Social Forum (WSF) in Karachi ended on a thoughtful note: Will the success of the event lead to a visible advancement of liberal democratic forces in Pakistan?

The simple answer would be: Yes, it can. However, the relationship of the WSF to people's political movement is not automatic. Much will depend on how the gains of the event are consolidated. It would also depend on the quality of gains that among other things will be conditioned on the merit of intellectual and academic input at the forum.

High hopes stem from the fact that the political landscape of Latin America has changed ever since 2001 when the first WSF was held in Brazil. After the WSF in Porto Alegre people voted a progressive party to power there and the right-wingers came under pressure all through the region. Then in India, the rightist BJP (Bhartia Junta Party) was ousted and Congress came to power with the support of the leftists after the Mumbai forum in 2005. Are these changes linked to the WSF? Who knows!

It is true that after 2001 all across Latin America, right from Mexico to Brazil to Haiti to Honduras to Costa Rica to Columbia to Bolivia to Peru to Chile to Venezuela, progressive forces have gained ground. In Brazil, which leads the G-20 (the group of 20 developing nations) in the World Trade Organization, a popular vote elevated labour leader Luiz Inacio 'Lula' de Silva to presidency and a more radical Hugo Chavez was voted to power in Venezuela. The WSF could have contributed to the process of change indirectly, but the presence of a host of factors such as the level of maturity of the progressive movement and its subjective situation must be the major determinants of those positive developments in the region.

The quality of input of a few Latin American guests at the Karachi WSF holds testimony to the fact that intellectually the current there is not only stronger but also comparatively matured. Chilean journalist Alec Kirk, who was part of the team of Terraviva, an independent newspaper of the WSF, in a brief conversation with Dawn Magazine disclosed that in Latin America today the radical pole is taking shape around President Chavez of Venezuela and the new Bolivian President Evo Morales, which according to him, is not a marginal phenomenon. New formulations have led to a popular demand for a decisive political break with the neo-liberal economic model. "We are experimenting with many innovative ideas in our region like evaluating the possibilities of a common gas pipeline, a common regional energy policy, a regional bank, etc." He, however, admitted that the process of devising alternatives is still at early stages.

These alternative ideas are exciting. And who can deny the power of ideas? They form the frame of our understanding of the world, inform our beliefs and drive our behaviours. Great ideas are so profound and frame-shaking that they quickly topple many of the things we believe, and transform our world views, our values and hence our actions. Maybe it is the power of emerging ideas that led to the shift in the region.

Unfortunately in Pakistan, for reasons beyond the scope of discussion here, there is a big deficit of

intellectual and academic activity which also reflected in the quality of input by Pakistani academics. The number of planned forums that had to be cancelled were only a reflection of this very reality. In these circumstances, the interaction of locals with intellectuals from other regions gain even more significance.

But, then, did the process of devising alternatives to the neo-liberal model of development through a dialogue made progress at the Karachi WSF? It probably did, but much less than it could have, had the environment in Pakistan been conducive to research and creative thinking.

Irfan Mufti, a WSF leader from Lahore who headed the programme committee, felt that the WSF did what it aimed at. "We promised to provide space and create environment where people can discuss what they want and express themselves through whatever medium they want. We had at least two plenary sessions each day along nine themes that we had decided to focus on; these included democracy, imperialism, militarization and armed conflicts, issues related to control of natural resources, trade, social justice, state and religion, development strategies, women and patriarchy, children and environment. The WSF Karachi delivered what it promised," he said.

More than anything else, the World Social Forum is a movement of ideas that prompts reflection, and the maximum possible transparent circulation of the results of that reflection on the mechanisms and instruments of domination by capital, on means and actions to resist and overcome that domination, and on the alternatives that can be proposed to solve the problems of exclusion and inequality that the process of capitalist globalization currently prevalent is creating or aggravating, internationally and within countries. The organizers and many participants - both local and foreign - when contacted, said they felt that the gains in terms of contents were meaningful.

Mufti said that the concept of people-centred diplomacy that transpired from marathon events on Kashmir, Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine never got the kind of attention and response in earlier forums compared to what it got in Karachi. He felt the Karachi meeting enriched the movement by also focussing well on this theme.

Tariq Ali, the radical student leader of the 1960s, cautioned against pitching expectations too high. In an interview to Terraviva, he admitted that he was not too optimistic about the political future of the country. He was critical of the NGOs which he termed the WGOs (Western Governmental Organizations) for keeping people away from politics. He somehow forgot that the WSF for all practical purposes was organized and sponsored by the very NGOs he was criticizing!

While making his formulations, he also did not take into account the fact that in a political vacuum and ideological chaos following the demise of the Soviet bloc, what option did the cadre of the left, which included middle-aged wholetimers, have before it? Sensing the weakening of the movement from within, their local opponents targeted them. Mainstream political parties did not have a programme that could inspire them. They were depressed and needed economic security. The NGO sector suited them so they entered that field. Their experience of working in communities and grassroots organization became their marketable skill. A decade- and-a-half later they have a far more comfortable life and are getting paid for doing what they used to do voluntarily. As for the political movement, it will evolve at its own pace.

Leaders of the WSF, one hopes, are aware that riding the WSF is like riding a bicycle - keep going forward or fall off. For the moment, the WSF seems to be riding well.

P.S.

From Dawn Magazine, April 2, 2006.