

# **Imperialism and anti-imperialism: Pakistan Left Legacy and Islamist Anti-Americanism**

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**The question that is being asked with some persistence, particularly in the context of war on terror raging in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, is whether anti-Americanism of the radical Islamists is anti-imperialist, and whether the left can make a common cause with radical Islamists to struggle against imperialism? The answer to both of these questions is a clear no.**

In the mid-1950s several Afro-Asian countries were asserting their independence from the hegemonic influence of Western powers, while Pakistan's rulers were driving the country deeper into subservient cold war alliances with the United States, the super imperialist power in the making. A new leadership was emerging in Africa and Asia involved in movements of genuine national liberation. Sukarno in Indonesia, Nkrumah in Ghana, Bandaranaike in Sri Lanka and Nasser in Egypt were trying to root out the remnants of imperialism from their countries, while Nehru of India along with Zhao Enlai of China were laying down the foundations of Non-aligned Movement.

In 1956 Nasser of Egypt having overthrown the decadent monarchy of King Farouk nationalised the Suez Canal and its operations. Britain and France which claimed imperial title to the ownership of the Canal went to the United Nation's Security Council to establish their title, only to be rebuffed by the Soviet Veto. Next they convened an international conference to drum up support for their claims. A resolution was moved in this conference calling for the surrender of the Suez Canal and its lucrative operations to the Anglo-French authority. Pakistan's delegates to the conference, first Hamidul Haq Chowdhury and then Feroz Khan Noon, supported the resolution while Krishna Menon, the Indian delegate, firmly opposed it. Later when the resolution was about to be passed by the Western delegates and their Eastern allies, Krishna Menon walked out of the Conference along with the Soviet, Sri Lankan and Indonesian delegates, rendering the proceedings meaningless.

Britain and France now resorted to more vicious tactics. They incited Israel to invade Egypt under the cover of their aerial bombardment. On the evening of October 31 news broke out on Radio Pakistan that Egypt was under attack by Israel, Britain and France. Upon hearing this news the Lahore Students Circle, which some of us had set up in the city to keep the spirit of the banned Democratic Students Federation (DSF) alive, went into action immediately. We decided to call for a mass demonstration the next day to condemn the naked imperialist aggression against Egypt. While some of the Circle members were put to work to prepare banners for the protest rally, the rest of us composed a leaflet announcing the demonstration and rushed it to one of the Urdu Bazaar printing shops. By midnight we had several hundred copies of the leaflet in hand. The rest of the night was spent taking the leaflet to all the newspaper offices where the morning editions were being printed, distributing it to all the college and university hostels by slipping copies under every residential room, and posting it in public places wherever space could be found.

The next morning as we gathered with our banners at the Gole Bagh (present Nasser Bagh), the designated launching point of our demonstration, people started arriving from all directions. Our

overnight leafleting had proved to be just the cue for the student body and the rest of Lahore to come out for the demonstration. Within minutes the Gole Bagh was filled with a huge crowd and we were on our way marching in procession to the Upper Mall to demonstrate in front of the British Consulate office. It was the biggest ever peaceful anti-imperialist demonstration held in the post-colonial history of Lahore.

By December the world opinion against the invasion of Egypt had become so vocal and pervasive that even the United States was compelled to ask for an immediate end to the invasion of Egypt forcing Britain, France and Israel to vacate their aggression.

At home, however, the Lahore Students Circle, which had hitherto operated discretely, became known for its left politics and anti-imperialism all of a sudden, coming under heavy state surveillance. Two years later when Gen. (later Field Marshal) Ayub Khan staged his military coup, anyone actively involved with the Circle who was found in Lahore was arrested along with many other progressive political workers, leaders and intellectuals. Fortunately the detainees did not have to spend much time in jail as Hon. M. R. Kiyani, chief justice of West Pakistan High Court ordered them released. But in the dark decade of military rule that followed, the left political forces and formations were kept under constant repression.

Neither did the Afro Asian liberation movements fair well after the Suez episode. The post-Eisenhower leadership in the United States adopted a strategy of imperial domination of the world based on the colossal military power accrued to it in the aftermath of World War II. It began to encircle the world with military bases, intervening in the affairs of any country whose state policy it did not approve. The history of such interventions is vast ranging from Korea and Vietnam in the 1950s to Iraq and Afghanistan extending into the present.

The rise of secular republican Arab nationalism in the 1950s was considered Soviet inspired by the US establishment and had to be sabotaged. For this purpose operatives of the CIA were sent into action, Saudi Kingdom's help was mobilized and for the first time the reactionary Islamists, such as the Muslim Brotherhood or al-Ikhwan, were pressed into service. For decades after that Islamists and their ideology of Islamism was used as a tool by the United States to achieve its hegemonic objectives. In Pakistan, the Jamat-e-Islami was bank-rolled throughout the 1950s and 60s, as its student wing armed itself and took control of the country's universities under the rule of US-friendly dictators. During the military rule of Gen. Zia (1977-1988), aided and abetted by CIA and Saudi oil wealth, the Jamat became the main non-state player in fomenting international jihad against the Soviet backed government of Afghanistan.

To sum up, the unscrupulously strident post war US imperialism admittedly weakened the left's resistance to it, while paving the way for the rise of anti-communist radical Islamism in the Muslim world. The problem is that the radical Islamism turned anti-American sometime after 1988 for reasons we need not go into here (In any case it does not require much talent in political science to figure out these reasons). The question that is being asked with some persistence, particularly in the context of war on terror raging in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, is whether anti-Americanism of the radical Islamists is anti-imperialist, and whether the left can make a common cause with radical Islamists to struggle against imperialism?

The answer to both of these questions is a clear no, but let me first comment on why these questions arise to begin with. Firstly, these questions arise due to the anti-imperialist rhetoric of the radical Islamists which is something incredible because it is not rooted even remotely in any serious understanding of what imperialism is and what its opposition means. The second reason that prompts the above questions is due to articulations by some of the genuinely left intellectuals. Tariq Ali for example has stated that the presence of US led forces in Afghanistan is an imperialist

occupation. I fully agree with that premise. However, the militant response of the Islamist Taliban to that occupation in its tactics, scope, and political agenda or the vision of the post-occupation society is definitely not anti-imperialist. Neither are the objectives of the present PPP government of Pakistan or the military establishment of Pakistan anti-imperialist whatever their game plans in Afghanistan.

To be anti-imperialist one must first understand what this beast called imperialism is. In its essence, imperialism is a system of exploitation of the poor of the less powerful countries of the global South by the rich of the more powerful countries of the North often in collusion with the rich of the less powerful countries. Imperialism may not be the highest stage of capitalism as V.I. Lenin tried to demonstrate in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but in modern times it has become deeply interwoven with capitalist relations of production.

There are several beliefs underlying the capitalist-imperialist exploitative system. These include intolerance of differences on the bases of religion, culture, race, and gender. The radical Islamists share all these beliefs with the capitalists-imperialist combine. There is no ideological connection whatsoever between the anti-Americanism of the Islamists and anti-imperialism of the left which rejects the above beliefs. It makes no sense for some of our otherwise enlightened friends to advise the left to switch off its anti-imperial agenda because it provides comfort to the anti-American, suicide bombing, head chopping Islamists called Taliban whether they be Afghan or Pakistani or both.

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