

Pakistan: “The LPP is a socialist party, very much involved in the day-to-day problems of the people”

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Country’s left is playing a critical role in the struggle for democracy and rights of workers. However, one fundamental step would be to cut the military budget and spend it on education and development. This will be an effective way to combat religious fundamentalism

Farooq Tariq is a leading left-wing activist. He is on the Executive Committee of the Labour Party Pakistan (LPP) and is active in many working-class struggles. For his struggle against military dictatorship, he has spent years in exile and been jailed at least half-a-dozen times. In an interview with the Viewpoint, he comments on the political scene in the country. Read on.

Salman Ali - You have been active in left politics since 1974. What were your early political activities? How did you embrace Marxism as your political ideology?

Farooq Tariq - It is a long journey. I joined left-wing politics when I did not know what was right-wing and what was left. You can say it was a mere an accident that made me a political activist. In 1974, when I was a student, I was in favour of women rights and believed that women have a right to work with men in in each and every sphere of social and economic life of society. I was against the biases and restrictions imposed upon the womenfolk of our country in the name of culture and religion. Islami Jamaat Tulba (IJT), the student wing of Jamaat Islami, did not like my views and I was beaten up by its goons on campus. This incident made me political activist; with the passage of time I grew nearer to a left-wing ideology and politics.

I did my masters in applied Psychology in 1976 and then joined my family business at Toba Tek Singh. After the imposition of Martial Law in July 1977 I came back to Lahore and started writing articles opposing martial law and in favour of democracy. I first interviewed Benazir Bhutto in September 1977 when she visited Faisalabad, then Lyall Pur. The interview was published in the Karachi-based weekly Al-Fatah. In those days Al-Fatah staunchly opposed martial law and supported the struggle for democracy and human rights.

In our struggle against Martial Law, our main opponents were religious fundamentalists. This reality made us leftists without any precise knowledge of leftism. In 1978, due to my anti-martial law political activities I was forced to leave Pakistan. I spent almost some eight years in The Netherlands and in England. During that time I helped establish the Struggle Group, which was active in Benazir Bhutto’s Pakistan People’s Party. By 1986 the situation had improved in Pakistan and I returned

home. The Struggle Group needed to develop roots in Pakistan's soil. But after Benazir's first stint in power, we concluded that the PPP would only serve the ruling classes. We left the PPP to begin campaigning for an independent workers party. After building a good trade union base, the Labour Party Pakistan (LPP) was launched in 1997.

Today we have a membership of over 3,000. One of the eight big trade union federations—the National Trade Union Federation (NTUF)—is a sympathetic body of the LPP. The NTUF represents over hundred thousand industrial workers. Our woman members set up the Women Working Help Line (WWHL), which has a membership of about 2,000.

Some people have criticised the LPP for being too tied up with NGOs. What do you think?

We take part in a Joint Action Committee for People's Rights, which includes 28 large NGOs in Lahore along with two other political parties (the National Workers' Party and the Christian National Party). There has been a division in the social movement in Pakistan over how much we should oppose fundamentalism and how much we should oppose American imperialism. Those NGOs who oppose fundamentalism have been physically attacked by fundamentalists, who have burned down their offices. Some NGOs favoured a measured attack on Afghanistan by American imperialism. We opposed that and were able to create something of a balanced position within the movement.

Our aim is to build the social movement along class lines. If we had a mass party in Pakistan most of these NGOs would have joined the Labour Party and campaigned through it. But since there is not a mass alternative of left force, NGOs play a role in organizing the social movements. The NGOs promote a liberalism that supports basic democratic, human values.

Do you think NGO's has damaged the work of left parties?

There are two kind of work, good and bad. That is the case within the NGO sector as well. In Pakistan, and especially in Lahore, there are many NGOs. They are issue-based and have limited influence. Some work with left parties for the welfare and capacity-building of local people. I think if these NGOs continue to work with left-based parties, we will have a chance to build a people-centered infrastructure that can bring positive change in the future.

What do you think about Pakistan's established political parties?

From the time of independence until today our country has been unable to establish basic democratic institutions. Most of the time so-called mainstream politicians jockey with each for power within the current undemocratic and corrupt system. To the detriment of our people and the progress of society they are committed to maintaining the social and economic status quo. All the political parties are dishonest; their leaders are doing nothing for the betterment of the country. Only representatives from the ordinary class can end this unjust system. The problems of ordinary men and women can only be understood by ourselves; only our representatives could ensure genuine solutions.

We want to form an electoral left alliance and we are talking to the left parties. We would like to organize around demands such as no to privatisation; nationalise all the privatised industries and the large monopolies; no to downsizing in the public sector—over 100,000 public employees' jobs have been lost in the last two years--- demand a minimum wage of 7,000 rupees; cut the defence budget drastically; repudiation of the foreign debt on the basis that it is odious. We believe one fundamental step would be to cut the military budget and spend it on education and development. This will be an effective way to combat religious fundamentalism.

Some news commentators predict that Imran Khan will be in power in the future. What are your thoughts?

I really respect Imran Khan as a cricketer and as a social worker. But I personally believe that Imran Khan, if ever comes in power, will be one of the saddest moments for Pakistan. Why? Because he believes in the capitalist system and thinks it can reform itself. He attempts to inspire others through his statistics and talks on the various news channels. But his vision of reforming capitalism is a dream. People who think he can bring revolution to Pakistan are under an illusion.

Recently we read that Tehrik-e-Insaaf had meeting with LPP? What were the objectives and what results came out from this meeting?

Yes, we had a meeting with Tehreek-e-Insaaf. Nothing was decided or finalized. It was just table talk between the workers of PTI and LPP workers. We are working for the rights of working class and we will do this in future too.

What does LPP say about Kashmir issue between India and Pakistan?

The Kashmir issue was created by the British as they formally left the Sub-Continent. They wanted to set up a situation in which states would fight each other. The issue can be solved if the politicians themselves are interested in it.

The LPP stands for an independent Kashmir—the right of self-determination for the Kashmiri masses, independent of Pakistan and India. We demand an immediate end to state brutality on both sides and the withdrawal of both Pakistani and Indian armies. Kashmir belongs to neither Pakistan nor India. It is for Kashmiri people to decide; they must resolve the situation by their own hands.

What is your balance sheet of the present government?

I personally believe that present government has failed to deliver anything over their last four years in office. They have carried out Musharraf's policies. We can see the inflation rate increasing with the passage of time. The present government governs in an ad hoc way. It doesn't have capacity to undertake issues and stay focused. I don't hesitate to say that this government is among the worst in the history of Pakistan. And I am sure that PPP will lose in the coming election. They will probably have a result similar to what they received in 1997, with only 27 percent of the vote.

Is there a future for left politics in Pakistan?

Pakistan is not a haven for left ideas. It's a theocratic state, totally dominated by religious ideas. I hope that with the passage of time a countrywide left political party or alliance will emerge and shape an alternative to such an undemocratic state. The country's left is playing a critical role in the struggle for democracy and rights of workers.

We don't raise slogans of revolution now or claim that socialism will solve everything. The LPP is a socialist party, very much involved in the day-to-day problems of the people. We develop campaigns around burning issues such as land rights. We have founded the Anti-Privatisation Alliance of Pakistan. We champion woman rights and human rights; we wage a struggle against child labour. We always try to bring together different groups and different trends to effectively network to accomplish concrete gains.

P.S.

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* Salman Ali is Lahore based and can be reached at, salmanali088 gmail.com