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Breaking the siege of Benazhir Bhutto's home: Participating in 1992 long march

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I watched with great interest the planning, strategies and traditions set by Tehreek Insaaf during their 14th August long march. I was sure from the very beginning that this will not go very far. I have participated in several long marches, *dharnaas* and rallies to oppose military dictatorships and undemocratic governments. Here is my experience of participating the 18th November 1992 Banazhir Bhutto's long march from Islamabad to Liaqat Bagh Rawalpindi.

When Benazir Bhutto announced the long march against the undemocratic practices of Mian Nawaz Sharif government on November 10 1992, we decided to participate.

I had left Pakistan People's Party in 1990 and we were working as Struggle group mainly in Punjab. We were a small left wing group. Our main activities were publication of a monthly *Mazdoor Jeddojuhd* and organizing study circles.

Our Struggle group decided to print a special number of our monthly *Mazdoor Jeddojuhd* highlighting the main reasons why people should join this long march. We printed the paper describing the two years of Mian Nawaz Sharif anti people policies and implementations. It was mainly the selling of state asset and implementation of neo liberal agenda.

Mian Nawaz Sharif did exactly the same what his government is doing at present time to stop the participation of PTI and PAT activists to join the two long marches. He has a long standing experience of state repression and methods to foil any mass movement against him.

Three days before the march, they started stopping and searching all buses and trains bound to Islamabad. They were off loading any one linked to PPP or to the march. The railway station of Lahore and Badami Bagh bus station was full of police.

Islamabad was cordoned off from all sides, not with containers as they are doing now but with sheer presence of police force who were searching all incoming transport.

Four of us had planned to go to Islamabad by train with all the five thousand copies of our monthly paper to be distributed at the long march. We were told by Railway Workers Union that this would be impossible for you to go with the papers. We insisted and asked them to help.

A plan was made. The post office trade union comrades told us there is a post compartment in each train and we can put the papers in a post office khaki large bag posing it as post and they can load on the boggy. It was good thinking. We agreed and our papers were on the train safely.

Police was everywhere on the railway station of Lahore as we arrived. We also posed as postmen and boarded in the post compartment of the train. There were no seats inside as this was loading

carriage. We were locked inside as police would search all the train on each railway station.

Next five hours were spent in darkness. We arrived in Rawalpindi Cant. railway station and were met by the local post office trade union activists who brought us out of railway station safely.

We took our bag with five thousands copy of the paper and went to stay at the rest house of post office in Rawalpindi Sadar area. At evening time after taking bath, we went to Islamabad to see possibilities of entering Islamabad, as Tahir Qadri put it the other day that they did "rehki". It was clear that we cannot enter Islamabad.

At the time, there were no television cameras following you and no one to report the repression of the police until next day when the newspapers would print the stories if they want to. BBC radio was another major source of information for urgent matters.

As we came back from a failed attempt to enter Islamabad, just outside the rest house, I was informed by a comrade waiting outside that police has raided the place and took away all the papers and arrested one person. Police got information from Lahore that a group has gone to Islamabad with the help of post office union.

We immediately left the place. We all went to stay in a small but very dirty little hotel. We had no extra cloths or any bag. Our entire luggage was confiscated during the police raid. We spent the night in this ugly place.

Benazhir home in Islamabad was cordoned off by iron wires and police was around every street to stop activists going to the place. Although, the Mian Nawaz Sharif government was claiming that Benazhir Bhutto is not arrested and is free for the long march. Something similar tactics used against PAT, the present Nawaz Government arrested most PAT activists in district and allowed the march to proceed.

I told comrades that I will go next morning to Benazhir home alone and the others should not take the risk as they would all be arrested. I had a planning.

I was working occasionally as Pakistan correspondence of Dutch World Service at the time. I had studied mass communication at Amsterdam University, although did not complete my degree, during my exile period from 1978 to 1986.

During the exile period, I was head of PPP in Netherlands and had started working full time for our Struggle group after leaving my studies incomplete. I had met Benazhir Bhutto several times but had developed differences on several ideological issues.

I had planned to use my radio journalist card to enter Benazhir Bhutto home. I used it successfully, although stopped several times by the police but was able to assure the police that I am a journalist on duty.

As I arrived inside, Naheed Khan was surprise to see me. She asked me how I could come here, no one is allowed. When Benazhir Bhutto saw me, she was also very pleased and greeted me warmly despite our sour relationship of the past times.

I told them I am here to participate in the long march. There were few at this home. Asif Zardari was there. Farooq Laghari, Asif Ahmad Ali, Jahngir Badar and few more PPP leaders were able to come to the home, may be a dozen or so. Benazhir Bhutto was determined to go out and cross all the iron wires around the home.

There were few Pakistani and foreign journalists as well over there.

First, we raised slogans inside the home lawn. I took over the lead and all my revolutionary slogans were answered by all the right wing leaders of PPP. "Down with American imperialism, Zia Kaa joo Yar hia Gaddar hai, Zia Baqiat Murdabad, Gerti howie Dewaroon Koo Aik Dhaka Aur Doo, Down with Nawaz, Long March Hoo ker rehai Ghah, Socialism Zendabad" and so on. Even Farooq Lighari was answering these slogans.

We came out raising slogans and there was a great mood. Benazhir Bhutto was in absolute defiant mood. Her eyes were glittering with anger. She also looked at me several times smilingly and raised more slogans. It was a comradeship of the time.

Then, we faced the iron wires all around. Police had not thought that we would cross that. And that we would jump over the wires.

It was great Naheed Khan who took the lead. She jumped first and we all followed. I was not aware of the whole planning. We were able to cross the wires within minutes. Police were taken aback. The planning was that there would be a Pajeero Jeep waiting for Benazhir Bhutto just outside the street to take her to Liaquat Bagh in Rawalpindi.

Suddenly this Jeep arrived and Benazhir Bhutto, Naheed Khan and few more jumped in, I could not find the place inside. It all happened within seconds. The Pajeero Jeep rushed out of the street while police started following it.

Few of us were left out. Benazhir Bhutto dodged the police for over an hour in different bazaars and street, finally reached the destination, the famous Liaquat Bagh where she was arrested and bundled to Karachi.

I came back to this small dirty hotel to find other comrades waiting for me anxiously. I told the whole story, went back to Lahore on buses but with a satisfaction that we contributed to the purpose that we fought well.

There was no deal secretly or openly to lift the siege. We broke the siege with our sheer determination to fight back. Tahir Ul Qadri claims that they have removed the containers but the fact is that he had made a deal for a safe passage. Imran Khan again and again asked the government to let him go to Islamabad. He was also allowed.

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