

Pakistan: Free Baba Jan!

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Qalandar Memon pieces together the story of an activist from Gilgit Baltistan who was recently sentenced to life imprisonment.



Baba Jan and a comrade behind bars

On 25th of September 2014 Baba Jan and 11 other activists of Gilgit Baltistan were sentenced to life imprisonment by an anti-terrorism Court in Gilgit city. Baba Jan and the others sentenced, however, are not terrorists. He is a respected political activist of Gilgit-Baltistan. He has been sentenced due to his activism in support of the oppressed of the region. The judgement is not so much a judgement against Baba Jan but rather an indictment on the structure of governance that operates in Gilgit-Baltistan. It also shows that those in power have a complete disregard for the people of the region. The Anti-Terrorism Court proved that Gilgit-Baltistan is governed by colonial structures of power. A structure that is increasingly being opposed by the people of the region.

I first met Baba Jan at a press conference he held at the Lahore Press Club in May 2010. He was there on a nationwide campaign to raise awareness of the rising water and flooding that was likely a result of a mountain atop Attabad village having fallen into the river. The fall of the mountain led to nineteen people dying and the destruction of Attabad village that lay under it. It stopped the flow of the water downstream and began sending it upstream. As the water bounced off the fallen mountain and rose it began to take with it houses, agricultural land, schools and roads. At the press conference, Baba Jan, was at pains to note the urgency of the situation. Something had to be done and quickly, he noted, or else whole villages would be destroyed.

Nothing was done. Villages were destroyed one after another. The rising water went up to the village of Passu. In its wake it destroyed the villages of Ayeenabad, Shishkat, Gulmit, Ghulkin and parts of Hussaini village. Tens of thousands of people were affected and around 460 families lost their homes and in most cases livelihoods. Relief camps were set up downstream from Attabad and even today, four years later, many families continue to live in them. The then PPP government did what all governments in Pakistan do – it wrote some checks. Two lacs per family were promised to the families most affected.

“The constable unloaded his whole magazine into the man’s chest”

By 11th August 2011 around 200 families had still not received the promised compensation from the government and so they protested. They blocked the road in Aliabad, Hunza, on which the Chief

Minister of Gilgit Baltistan was to travel. Police officials, embarrassed at their inability to disperse the protesters with water canons and tear gas started shooting into the crowd. Afza Baig, a young student, was shot. His father, Sherullah, a few yards behind on the road saw him fall and gathering courage moved towards the police shouting, 'you have killed my son'. He was unarmed. This summer, I met many of those present at the protest and one eye-witness told me, "Afzal Baig's father was inconsolable but unarmed and harmless, he marched straight towards the police and they too were in shock. The DSP and his guard took refuge in a shop and pulled the shutter down. Soon a crowd surrounded the shop. The guard started firing from inside the shop and bullets rang past us through the shutter. Afzal's father was to the left of the shutter. The DSP and the guard raised the shutter after firing and tried to make a run for it. Afzal's father blocked their way and stood in front of them. The DSP ordered his guard to shoot him. I heard him give the order...it happened in front of me. The constable unloaded his whole magazine into the poor man's chest'. Afzal's father fell dead on the spot. The whole valley saw the two murder and they, as they should, rose in protest. Most Government buildings were burnt in Aliabad and many police and government agency officials were given a beating (but none suffered any serious injuries), while many miles away a police station in Gulmit was also burnt.

Baba Jan was unaware of the happenings in Aliabad. He was further downstream enjoying tea with the view of the Rakaposhi mountains peak as a backdrop. He was called by people to help organise the protesters and he arrived many hours later after the people had enacted their actions of vengeance. He went first to the hospital to see the injured and dead. Over the course of the night he persuaded people to follow a peaceful protest. They would bring the dead to the roadside in the morning and demand that those officers responsible for the murder be held to account. The next day the chief minister promised them just this.

However, what Baba Jan and around a hundred young men got were FIRs against them. The agencies, police and intelligence agencies personnel were embarrassed to have faced a beating from the people and to have lost, for however brief a moment. They wanted to return the status quo. And the status quo means their rule. To do so and to intimate the population they framed Baba Jan for orchestrating the burning of the government buildings. Again, this summer, I met people who told me that they were with Baba Jan drinking tea when rioting in Aliabad was happening and that they went over to Aliabad after all this had already happened.

For two years Baba Jan was in jail and denied bail. An international campaign for his release supported by intellectuals such as Noam Chomsky and Tariq Ali among others and protests far afield as Holland and Japan and locally in Lahore, Islamabad and Gilgit were finally successful in getting him bail. During those two years he was tortured on three occasions along with Iftikhar Hussain, who has been in jail for four years and has also been sentenced to life imprisonment in the same case. Meanwhile, the DSP that ordered the firing has been promoted.

The sentencing of Baba Jan, locally known the Che Guevara of Gilgit-Baltistan, (though Baba Jan organises in a non-violent way) for his intransigent stand on causes of the people brings to light the shortcomings of the Pakistani state in Gilgit Baltistan. More than any other region, bar Balochistan, GB is at the mercy of the Bureaucracy and the Military. Constitutionally, the status of Gilgit Baltistan has been tied to that of Kashmir and is therefore 'disputed'. Its people have no representation in the national assembly, the supreme court does not hear their appeals and the Gilgit-Baltistan assembly, on matters of importance, is toothless. This leaves de facto power with the military and bureaucracy. Used to unquestioned power, they are abusing it.

This summer I had a chance to meet young students from Gilgit Baltistan across many villages. Most expressed their frustration at the system of governance there and the lack of sovereignty. They were all aware of the Aliabad instance and it stood for them, as not only an instance of injustice but a

marker of the system of colonialism they face. I was asked by many of them for advise on how they could fight to change the system. I told them I had little idea. However, unless the charges against the political prisoners of Gilgit Baltistan are abrogated and the the area given a constitutional package that lays the sovereignty of political, economic and social matters in the hands of the people of the region, I suspect, on my next visit these young persons would have found an answer to their question.

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P.S.

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<http://www.thefridaytimes.com/tft/free-baba-jan/>

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