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Gilgit-Baltistan: Looking back at Baba Jan's struggle and the repression he has to face

Friday 26 May 2017, by [MALEWSKI Jan](#) (Date first published: July 2016).

Accused without evidence of acts that he could not have committed, since he was at the time about sixty kilometres away, Baba Jan was tortured, convicted and then acquitted on appeal. He came second in the elections in 2015 while imprisoned and was tipped to win a by-election. Now our comrade, who is vice-president of the Awami Workers Party (AWP) of Pakistan and leader of the party in the Gilgit-Baltistan region, was sentenced by the Supreme Court of Appeal in this region occupied and administered by Pakistan, on June 8, 2016, to 40 years in prison and a fine of 500,000 rupees, under a special law, called "anti-terrorist." Eight other activists - Iftikhar Hussain, Aleem, Irfan Ali, Shukurullah Baig, Sarfraz, Rasheed, Musa and Sher Khan - received the same sentence.

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Despite what the severity of the sentence seems to imply, Baba Jan and his comrades are not activists who took up arms against the state. They simply raised their voices for the fate of thousands of people of the Hunza Valley who were displaced as a result of a climate disaster in January 2010 and protested against corruption and against the violent repression that had been unleashed against the victims demonstrating in August 2011.

_"An institution that is neither fair nor neutral"

In the words of the Asian Commission on Human Rights (AHRC) on June 16: "the date of the verdict raises suspicions regarding its fairness and impartiality. Baba Jan was a candidate in the by-election, scheduled for May 28, 2016, to the Legislative Assembly of Gilgit-Baltistan in the Hunza-6 district. Three days before the vote, Baba Jan's campaign team, including regional AWP leaders, had held a massive rally in support of his candidacy, also bringing together large numbers of women and young people."The same day, Zafar Iqbal of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), which had ruled the region before the present government of the Pakistan Muslim League "Nawaz" (PML-N), had asked the Supreme Court of Appeal to disqualify the candidacy of Baba Jan because he had been convicted by an anti-terrorism court. As is well known, Zafar Iqbal is colluding with his PML-N rival in the Hunza-6 district, who is the son of the current governor, belonging to a family traditionally dominant in the region."Ignoring the fact that the Court of Justice had already acquitted Baba Jan, the Court of Appeal decided that the elections would be postponed until the government's appeal against the acquittal was reviewed. This was unexpected, because the electoral court had ordered the candidacy

of Baba Jan to be accepted, allowing him to stand despite being in prison.

"The verdict of the Supreme Court of Appeal is a blatant act of sabotage of his electoral campaign, aimed at favouring his political rivals of the PML-N, which is in power. Baba Jan is being punished because he represents and expresses the interests of the working class of Gilgit-Baltistan. This legal prejudice, favoring the ruling elite, is an attempt to sabotage the will and aspirations of the people, who sympathize with Baba Jan and support him. The judiciary, which should be a bastion of equality and fairness, thus permits the denial of human rights. How can the people of Gilgit-Baltistan expect justice from an institution that is not fair and neutral?" [1]

Baba Jan and his comrades owe their incarceration to the so-called "anti-terrorist" law, adopted in 1997 and since amended several times to further strengthen its repressive character. Under the heading of "terrorism", this legislation includes the most diverse acts, including "sparking civil unrest." Aziz Siddiqui, of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, summed it up in these words in 2012: "This is a recipe for making an innocent person a suspect and a suspect guilty - or even dead. The law virtually imposes guilt." [2]

Emergencies and corruption

The story of the imprisonment of Baba Jan and his comrades began in winter 2010 in the Hunza Valley, surrounded by the Karakoram Mountains, on the territory of Gilgit-Baltistan, a region that is not de jure part of Pakistan, but which is de facto controlled by Islamabad.

The Pakistani government refuses to officially recognize this region as part of the country, in the hope of including it in a possible referendum on Kashmir, a region disputed between neighbouring India and Pakistan since the end of British rule, whose population, according to a UN resolution never put into practice, should have decided its own fate by a vote. Since the people of Gilgit-Baltistan are predominantly Muslim, the Pakistani state counts on their votes to tilt the majority in Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan in its favour.

Meanwhile, the people of Gilgit-Baltistan do not have Pakistani constitutional rights, have no elected representatives in Islamabad, have only an autonomous Legislative Assembly, which is in reality only consultative reality, and a government with half of its eight members and the chief minister (governor) appointed by Islamabad. Its judges and court presidents are appointed by the Prime Minister of Pakistan. The border with China is a strategic region. The Hunza Valley is also the main gateway between China and Pakistan and the launching of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which runs through it - a project valued at \$46 billion - whets the appetites of the already highly corrupt administration. Colonial control of this region guarantees impunity for those who make the decisions there.

On January 4, 2010, a massive landslide in Hunza Attabad blocked the river and led to the formation of a lake, threatening the villages of the valley. Twenty people were killed, dozens injured. The fields and orchards were flooded. Baba Jan, then a member of the Labour Party Pakistan [3] launched a national campaign to make people aware of the situation, warning that entire villages would be decimated unless urgent action was carried out by the government and humanitarian actors. His warnings were ignored. The Chinese government, which had managed successfully a similar situation in 2008, offered help. In vain. The contract was given to the Pakistani military construction company, which promised that the debris of the landslide would be cleared away quickly. But water accumulated over weeks to form a lake 23km long, completely submerging four villages. It took two hours to cross by boat. The lake destroyed the homes of about a thousand people and made them refugees. It affected around 25 000 people at least by cutting off all communication with the rest of

the country. The situation was out of control and draining the lake was a much more delicate prospect.

Repression

For three months, the population of the valley demonstrated in the streets until the government announced financial compensation for each of the most affected families. But a quarter of them received nothing, the compensation probably ending up in the pockets of corrupt officials.

On 12 August 2011, 25 of the 457 families who had received no compensation blocked at Aliabad the Karakorum Highway, the main route linking Pakistan to China. The police decided to disperse the protesters to allow passage for the Chief Minister Mehdi Shah, who had come to visit. Without any warning, they opened fire on the crowd, killing the young Afzal Baig, who was 22 years old, and his 50-year old father, Sherullah Baig, who tried to protect him. The whole valley rose up in protest, clashing with police, burning a police station and a prefectural office. For four days, the population took control of the town of Aliabad.

To calm the population, the authorities falsely claimed that proceedings had been initiated against the murderous police and provided financial compensation to the bereaved families. They took the opportunity to prepare the repression of progressive milieux, so as to impose silence about the events. A week later, on 19 August, 36 people were arrested (including ten members of the LPP, six of them being detained). A new wave of arrests began on 16 September with 33 new arrests, including Baba Jan. Arrested on terrorism charges, they were severely tortured by a team of police investigators and the secret services.

Meanwhile, the judicial inquiry ordered by the Chief Minister of Gilgit-Baltistan for the murder of the protesters has up to now made absolutely no progress. The police officer responsible for the death of two unarmed protesters has been promoted to the rank of superintendent, while hundreds of people displaced by the disaster of Lake Attabad continue to live in camps.

Prisoner and popular leader

In prison, Baba Jan began the struggle to improve the conditions of prisoners and to promote harmony between Shiite and Sunni prisoners, held separately and not having the right to meet (even in prison, the administration practises divide and rule!). He held meetings with the leaders of the two communities of prisoners and convinced them to fight together for their rights. As a "reward", Baba Jan and four of his fellow party members were separated from other prisoners and tortured. They were severely beaten, their feet were crushed and prison officials denied them medical treatment.

A vigorous campaign for their release then developed in Pakistan and around the world. Intellectuals like Noam Chomsky and Tariq Ali took up the defence of Baba Jan and his comrades. Finally, in October, 2012, Baba Jan was released on bail. But some of his comrades - especially Iftikhar Hussain, tortured at the same time as Jan - were still imprisoned. Once released, Baba Jan, now a member of the leadership of the newly formed AWP, remained active in organizing the people of Gilgit-Baltistan, continuing the struggle by peaceful means, organizing mass demonstrations over the question of the price of wheat in early 2014, protesting against the privatization of natural resources in the region and their sale to Chinese capital.

This was too much for the corrupt local establishment. In September 2014, an anti-terrorism court

sentenced Baba Jan and eleven other activists to 71 years in prison under three different charges, all related to the riots of Aliabad. The court did not take into account the judicial inquiry into the killings that caused the riot. Only five other accused, who were members of the PML-N or had agreed under pressure to join it, were acquitted. Learning the news of his sentence on September 25, 2014, Baba Jan, who was still at liberty, decided to surrender to the authorities. He has been in prison since then.

In April 2015, another court quashed two of Baba Jan's three convictions. In May 2015, still in prison, he announced his candidacy for the election of the Assembly of Gilgit-Baltistan on the AWP list. During the two week campaign, led by activists of the AWP and without the presence of Baba Jan, who was still in jail, the Hunza Valley witnessed historical scenes: thousands of people were in the streets with the red and white flags of the AWP, the campaign was fully funded by its supporters, there were thousands of women - an unprecedented phenomenon in this region where women's suffrage is not respected and the doors of politics are closed to them. In the end, the candidate of the ruling party, Mir Ghazanfar Ali - a member of the former royal family that kept the region under its boot for nearly 1,000 years - won the election. He controlled the administration and enjoyed the support of the majority of local capital, and could thus not only finance his campaign, but also impose his presence in the media and the polls. But Baba Jan, with over a third of the votes, came second, beating the candidates of the dominant historical parties - the PPP, the PTI - and all the others.

When Mir Ghazanfar Ali became governor of the territory in April 2016, a by-election was called to replace him. Everything was tried by the election administration to stop Baba Jan standing, but ultimately the Court of Electoral Justice accepted the nomination of the detainee. This time the opinion polls predicted that he would win. The local elites could not tolerate the presence of a spokesperson of the population in the local assembly, even if such an elected representative had only the right to speak and no right to decide. To prevent his victory, the elections were postponed. And Baba Jan had to be convicted in order to prevent him from being elected.

The case of Baba Jan and his comrades is a damning indictment of the domination of Gilgit-Baltistan by a coercive neocolonial regime that brutally represses any whisper of resistance. But even by putting its opponents in jail, this administration will not succeed in silencing or controlling the movement of working people that they have helped to build in this region. The conviction is not accepted by the people, as evidenced by the popularity of the slogan "Teri Jan, Meri Jan, Baba Jan, Baba Jan!" ("Baba Jan is dear to you, he is dear to us!"). In Gilgit-Baltistan and Pakistan, the AWP has launched a mass campaign to overturn the unjust decision of the court. The campaign demands the immediate release of Baba Jan and his comrades, the withdrawal of the false accusations, the publication of the judicial inquiry, still kept secret, into the murder by the police of Afzal Baig and Sherullah Baig in 2011, as well as putting on trial the police officers responsible and stopping the prosecution of those who defend human rights in Gilgit-Baltistan.

To force the Pakistani regime to back down, we must develop international solidarity. Because only a global campaign can worry the ruling elites in Pakistan and force them to respect human rights. In the past, international solidarity saved our Peruvian comrade Hugo Blanco and forced the release of South African leader Nelson Mandela. In the same way we can free Baba Jan from the clutches of his torturers.

Jan Malewski

P.S.

* "Class"justice": Baba Jan and his comrades sentenced to 40 years in prison!". Translation IVP.
<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.humanrights.asia/news/urgent-appeals/AHRC-UAU-012-2016>

[2] Quoted by Amanullah Kariapper and Cindy Zahnd, « Emprisonnés et torturés pour avoir soutenu les victimes d'une inondation », [le Courrier,] May 8, 2012:
https://www.lecourrier.ch/98417/emprisonnes_et_tortures_pour_avoir_soutenu_les_victimes_d_un_e_inondation

[3] The Labour Party Pakistan (LPP) was at that time the Pakistani organization of the Fourth International. In November 2012, along with the Awami Party Pakistan and the Workers' Party Pakistan, the LPP formed the Awami Workers' Party (AWP, Workers' Party of the People) with the aim of unifying the Pakistani left and overcoming past sectarian conflicts.