

# **Pakistan: After Faizabad - what is to be done ? Fascism, fundamentalist violence, the State and the Left**

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There has been a tangible sense of despair among liberal and progressive commentators in the wake of the state's capitulation to the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah (TLYRA) at Faizabad [[1](#)].

It has been said that the state's writ has been forfeited, mobs now dictate policy, and extremism has permeated deep into society's roots.

While there is truth to such lamentations, there is also an urgent need to move beyond such cathartic grieving, to learn from what this moment signified, and strategise affirmatively for the future.

## **Fascism unbound**

It is important to remember that the forfeiture of the state's writ in Faizabad has not occurred without its own complicity. This is true both in a historical and a current sense.

The blasphemy and anti-Ahmedi laws, whose protection has animated the new surge of fanaticism, were strengthened and weaponised by the Pakistani state.

More recently, the spate of enforced disappearances of progressive bloggers, and the orchestrated campaign of vilification against them earlier in the year, had insidiously conflated political dissent against the establishment with blasphemy.

In this context, the public affirmation of Khadim Hussain Rizvi's demands by the state at Faizabad was the logical culmination of the anti-blasphemy hysteria collusively fomented by the state and the right.

Nearly all political or religious dissent against the majoritarian consensus was now deemed a legitimate target for lethal violence.

Yet, even if the state is complicit in the rise of fascism, that does not imply it is in control of the passions that have been aroused.

Among the most chilling aspects of Faizabad was that it took us a step closer to public sanction for

mass murder.

As the TLYRA leaders demanded the publication of an Ahmadi registry and the creation of state commissions dedicated to the persecution of the minority group, the state's acquiescence signified its nod to steps that, historically speaking, have foreshadowed genocide.

The mesmerised mob-like euphoria that would greet Khadim Hussain Rizvi's onstage invocation of rhetorical violence against religious 'enemies' also provided a legible blueprint for how such mass violence could easily be made to occur.

*Fascist movements are not an uncommon sight in the world today - across the globe, movements have resurfaced that have transformed the economic and cultural anxieties of ordinary people into political projects that scapegoat racial and religious minorities.*

Just months ago, American Nazis openly marched in Charlottesville, Virginia with torches in hand, chanting 'Jews will not replace us' and calling for the establishment of a white ethno-state in the US.

European streets from Greece to Poland have witnessed fascist marches seething with anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic hatred in the past year alone.

The crucial difference is that across the democratic world, such public displays of bigotry are usually met with organised resistance.

The Nazis at Charlottesville were met by larger numbers of anti-fascist and leftist activists, one of whom paid for her defiance with her life.

From anarchists in Greece to communists in India, the forward march of the organised far right has been opposed and defied on the streets, usually by political workers of a progressive disposition.

The fascist frenzy that lasted for three weeks at Faizabad however, saw no such street challenge, allowing for an impression that it represented majority sentiment.

### **Pakistani progressives - insufficient or ineffective?**

Quite often, the explanation offered for such inaction in Pakistan revolves around a widely-prevalent idea that liberals and progressives in Pakistan are simply too minuscule a minority to exert any influence in an overwhelmingly conservative polity.

Articles abound in the international press about Pakistan's permanently 'beleaguered' liberal minority while jokes habitually crop up on social media about how liberal and left Pakistanis can be counted on two hands.

This perception is understandable. But it is also something of a careless underestimation.

There is of course little doubt that the predominant political disposition in the Islamic republic is one that is conservative and authoritarian.

Yet, after a decade of deadly fundamentalist violence, with often visible links to state institutions and laws; frustration from the senseless bloodshed, and lost lives and opportunities has crystallised in a significant progressive minority, which is severely disenchanted with the destructive character of the state and its proxies.

Until now, the bulk of this minority is visible largely on social media.

If the content and volume of engagement on liberal and progressive social media platforms is anything to go by, Pakistanis who believe in a greater degree of individual religious liberty, democratic continuity, political freedoms, socio-economic justice, and liberties for women and minorities, number in at least the hundreds of thousands, if not more.

Yet one rarely sees even a fraction of such numbers amassed for these causes in the streets.

As Aasim Sajjad notes in his recent column, it is this inability of most progressives to consciously act as members of a political community that constitutes a stiffer challenge than the supposed smallness of their numbers.

The TLYRA's cadres too were not present in enormous numbers at Faizabad – there were a couple thousand of them at best at the height of the sit-in – yet they managed to cultivate the impression of representing popular sentiment.

Even if one accounts for the support of the deep state, they were simply much more organised than Pakistani progressives are today.

Why is this so? Popular opinion dictates that Pakistan's descent into madness is the product of an ideological shift – one in which progressives have simply been marginalised by the rightward drift of political convictions.

But there is also a practical, material dimension to this shift – it has also been a consequence of the loss of the left's organisational forms and spaces, which has greatly weakened and diminished progressive politics over time.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, political Islamism, while still a force, was kept in check by the presence of formidable progressive political and social forces.

Parties like the National Awami Party (NAP), social movements like the Khudai Khidmatgar, and the once-powerful left-wing labour, farmer, and student organisations, not only used to provide an ideological counterweight to the far right, but also channelled working people's class and nationalistic grievances against an unrepresentative and exploitative economic and political system.

As decades of both military and civilian authoritarianism destroyed those class-based organisations through violent repression and bans, they also undermined the organic reproduction of political subjects who self-identified and acted primarily through the secular categories of class and regional nationalisms.

The loss of these organisational spaces amid a global decline of left-wing politics after the Cold War was catastrophic for progressive politics in Pakistan.

Shorn of both their shared clout and interactive spaces, progressives split up into disparate Marxist, liberal, and ethno-nationalist camps, each seeking their own form of accommodation with the state.

This often resulted in dubious political positions, from tacit support by some for the Musharraf coup to backing non-transparent military operations.

At the same time, the loss of progressive class-based organisations also meant a withering of the close relationships between progressive intellectuals and working classes that had fuelled the left-wing struggles of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Increasingly, it was the ideologues of the right that filled the space progressives had vacated. As the state and its American and Gulf benefactors patronised extremist mosques and seminaries, class grievances began to be morphed and politically mobilised through increasingly exclusionary and reactionary expressions of religious identity.

The earlier struggles against class exploitation by feudal, capitalist and imperialist elites were replaced with crude fundamentalist formulations about 'Western cultural invasion', often defined to mean anything remotely progressive as coming from the 'West', from women's freedoms to music and dance.

Rizvi's TLYRA is merely the latest iteration in this process of class contradictions being cynically mobilised in the service of totalitarian ideology.

Rebuilding progressive organisations and collective spaces – be it through joining existing ones, forming new ones, or overturning senseless legal restrictions like the 33-year-old student union ban – is critical if fascism is to be fought.

Agonising over the need for 'counter-narratives' is pointless if the social and political collectives that will popularise and enact these narratives are weak or non-existent.

As such collectives are rebuilt, so too will the possibilities of both class and inter-ethnic solidarity and indigenous cultural resistance that were the mainstay of the progressive politics of our past.

### **A return to a constructive class politics**

However, even as progressives reorganise, it is also clear that they cannot simply do so under the banner of secularism and tolerance alone.

For a disaffected young generation whose subjectivity was forged by the post-Zia Pakistani state and the imperialist invasions of the 9-11 era, there is an overwhelming suspicion of such labels as being a cover for more sinister motivations.

While secular pluralism must remain central to the foundations of any progressive political project, progressives cannot rely solely on symbols of an ideological milieu that has not been experienced by a majority of the population, and that hence, carries few positive connotations for them.

To render such ideals palatable to a conservative majority, they have to be tied to and synonymised with political demands aimed at the redistribution of wealth and power.

This is not just important because Pakistan is one of the most obscenely unequal societies in the world, where millions of under-employed and poorly educated young men, living alienated lives with bleak prospects, become useful fodder for fundamentalist entrepreneurs, who convince them of the possibility of finding purpose in fighting imaginary threats to religious honour.

It is also important because in a populist era, in which the legitimacy of the political and economic status quo is crumbling, a progressive project can only succeed in blocking the right-wing onslaught with popular support if it actively seeks to transform existing relationships of power (rather than seek accommodation and 'reconciliation' with the status quo, as most formerly liberal-left parties have done).

There are two principal ways in which this political project can be constructed. The first has to do with undertaking conscious and collective resistance against excesses of political and economic

power.

Anyone who stakes a claim to progressive politics must work to support those engaged in struggles for a more just distribution of resources – and there are many.

This includes, among others, workers protesting for living wages and formal contracts, *katchi abadi* residents struggling for dignified housing, farmers demanding rights to the land they till, women fighting against patriarchal violence, ethno-nationalist political workers protesting for the right to freely express their beliefs, and indigenous communities protesting the destruction of their local ecology by the state and private capital.

If such disparate struggles can be brought together as a collective movement for people's rights, they can create the critical mass needed to revive the political clout of the left.

However, a politics of redistribution cannot solely be confrontational, be it on the question of the civil-military imbalance, extremism, or resource distribution.

In order to be effective, our politics must also be constructive. It must seek to mobilise and deploy common resources to meet people's collective needs.

This is critical, in part, because the madrassahs and charity networks have exploited the survival needs of the poor to great effect.

Constructive programmes rooted in an ethic of participatory and cooperative labour for the collective good are also part of both the progressive traditions from our region's past, as well as contemporary revivals in progressive socio-economic movements on the left from Cuba to Nepal.

Such work is easier said than done and will require years to build. But the political worth of constructive forms of productive and redistributive work is undeniable.

Even in our recent context, the example of Edhi is instructive – till his death, Edhi remained an unapologetic humanist and avowed follower of Marx, speaking out for the liberation of the poor, women and minorities, while often taking unorthodox theological positions that could easily have landed others in the dock for blasphemy.

Yet, the peerless example he established through his constructive humanitarian work ensured that he could openly speak truth to power without fear.

Of course, not everyone can be Edhi, nor is the suggestion that all progressives should rush to establish charitable institutions. The forms such interventions may take depends on the context, resources and capacity.

What is important is the principle of creating cooperative models of fulfilling people's needs that can become vehicles for the transmission of egalitarian ideas and practices, and reflect the society progressives wish to see in the future.

If even small numbers of people around the country begin to engage in such forms of conscious collective practice over the next few years, it will help create the sense of purpose, community and identity required for the popular rejuvenation of progressive politics.

Perhaps more than anything, progressives must become conscious of the legitimacy and urgency of their cause.

There are a great many people who can sense things are going awry, and that violence and injustice in the name of religion, national security and petty political interests have gone on far too long.

Yet, there remains a certain timidity in thought and action, remnants of a political culture long afflicted with defeatism, and wracked by self-doubt and fears, about the reactions of a society that never fails to punish the mildest of critical thought and speech.

We are now at the point where we no longer have a choice. The state, the extremists, and their enablers in political society have pushed this society to the brink of collapse.

Faced with this realisation, their only answer is to further divert people's frustrations toward imaginary foreign and domestic enemies.

The progressive agenda; of the democratisation of the state, of the redistribution of resources to meet ordinary people's basic needs, of an end to the doctrine of national security and strategic depth, of the celebration of ethnic, national, religious and ideological difference and diversity, of the dismantling of patriarchal oppression, of the rejuvenation of the ecology; is a decisively better one.

More than anyone else, progressives themselves need to overcome their doubts to realise this and consciously act upon it.

Otherwise, our descent into barbarism is inevitable.

**Ammar Rashid**

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**P.S.**

\* "Pakistan: After Faizabad - what is to be done?". Dawn. Updated December 08, 2017:

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1375341>

\* The writer is a researcher in gender, development and public policy and a member of the Awami Workers Party. He tweets @ammarrashid

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## Footnotes

[1] See ESSF (article 42608), [Pakistan \(Islamabad\) and the Faizabad surrender - Capitulating to fanatics - The timeline, the demands](#).