

Seven theses on the rise of fascism in Pakistan

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The surrender by state authorities to violent protesters sent a wave of shock and despondency throughout those sections of Pakistani society that continue to hold onto utopian ideals of tolerance and the writ of law. The apparently seamless ascent of a marginal group to the centre stage of national consciousness, and its recognition as a powerful and legitimate political actor by the top echelons of state power, has bewildered political commentators. In fact, liberal analysts are describing the spectacular rise of the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah as merely a ‘conspiracy’ against the current civilian setup, substituting a commentary on ‘current affairs’ for social analysis.

On the contrary, I posit that rather than stemming from a secret plot, the TLJR should be seen as a rising fascist movement, which makes it potentially more threatening than a terror group in cahoots with sections of the state. Below I argue how fascism is a useful category to understand the TLJR’s politics, since it contains seven basic themes that fascist forces around the globe share in common, despite their geographical and historical specificity.

Fascist movements emerge in moments of social and economic decay, with existing political formations unable to provide ideological anchorage to the public. Fascism is a modern phenomenon, and presupposes a modern society of alienated individuals held together by the belief in abstract concepts, with nationalism as the dominant vehicle for producing a sense of community. Yet, when existing structures are unable to arouse passion among the population, the process of alienation increases in society, and concomitantly, the popular desire for a stable community intensifies. This gap is filled by fascist groups, often through the invocation of millenarian fantasies or an imagined glorious past.

In the case of Pakistan, it will be fair to say that the existing political parties have lost legitimacy in the eyes of a large number of people, partly due to their obvious shortcomings, and partly due to the effective propaganda machine deployed against them. With parties merely becoming mechanistic institutions doling out patronage, they have lost the ability to develop a popular discourse that can counter the narrative of extremists in society. Without much resistance to their agenda, the TLJR was free to develop a millenarian narrative that could give a sense of purpose to large swathes of politically alienated people.

2. The national community proposed by fascists is both exclusive and under constant threat. Whether it is the Nazis in Germany who excluded Jews, or Hindutva fundamentalists in India who exclude Muslims from the Indian nation, fascists always aim to create a gap between legal citizenship and the privileged position of a particular community within the nation. In the case of the TLJR, Muslims have the privileged position, and non-Muslims are marked as outsiders against which the community gains its sense of the self.

But more importantly, fascists posit the community as perpetually under threat from both outsiders

as well as traitors within. The heightened sense of vulnerability of such communities can be gauged by the fact that in a country with 97 percent Muslims, the idea that the sanctity of the Holy Prophet (pbuh) is under threat is not only a widely-held belief, but has also paralysed the state under popular pressure. Fascist notions of community are framed as the community facing a constant threat, promoting a siege mentality amongst its adherents.

3. Such vulnerability demands constant vigilance on the part of members of the group to purge the false from the true by public demonstrations of fidelity. Fascist movements are particularly demanding of their members because they require repeated campaigns against any real or imaginary threat to the sanctity of the community, particularly by arousing emotions of insult and anger. Fascists want their constituency to always be angry, which also implies that they want it to constantly feel humiliated, without which their project would fall apart.

4. The psychic structure of fascist movements makes violence the dominant language for communicating with opposing points of view. The fragility of the fascist community requires constant reminders to its own base of its puritan identity, a task most easily fulfilled in moments of violent ruptures. In the case of the TLYR, strategic confrontations with the state and targeted threats against alleged adversaries have worked as reminders to its base that not only is there a viable threat to the community, but that the TLYR is the vanguard for a puritan community in the midst of general decay. Much like some toxic versions of nationalism, such a politics expects its followers to be ready to give and take lives when the community is under threat – which it always is.

5. Fascist movements succeed when they are able to win over sections of the state apparatuses. Whether in the Weimar Republic or Franco's Spain, fascists were able to win over large swathes of existing politicians, intellectuals, generals, bureaucrats and police officials who colluded with fascist forces even prior to their formal takeover of the state. Rather than acting as a united entity that agrees on at least a minimal agenda, ie the preservation of state power, there are moments when different institutions remain at loggerheads even when an external force threatens to overwhelm them.

The most shocking element in the Faizabad affair has been precisely this infighting within the state apparatus, giving the impression that certain sections of the state had their sympathies with the protesters, so as to settle scores with rival institutions. This then creates a situation where it is perceived that when faced with situations like the dharna fascists are seen not as enemies but as potential collaborators in the petty fights in the corridors of power. It is the inability of the state to put up a united front against the TLYR that emboldened the group, enough for it to openly incite violence against officials in the government without any fear of legal or administrative reprisals.

6. The various members of the group are brought together under the leadership of a charismatic personality who at once reminds the people of themselves and yet transcends their own miserable conditions. Adorno called this 'mass narcissism', where people come to identify narcissistic leaders who appear from the same social/cultural milieu as them, but are confident enough to express their angst openly. The cult of the authoritarian personality means that people remain isolated from each other, and can only assert their being as long as they do not question the authority of the leader.

Similarly, the mythology surrounding Khadim Rizvi at times borders the ridiculous. But his appeal to a rural and working class constituency is precisely that he can claim to be an ordinary person in his mannerisms, while simultaneously embodying a spiritual idea far beyond anything on offer in society.

7. Finally, despite its claims to usher in a new era, fascism ensures that nothing fundamentally changes in the structure of society. For example, the world is today witnessing problems on a mass

scale that have nothing to do with a conspiracy, but are part of the objective transformations propelled by contemporary capitalisms. Automatisation is making a large section of the global working class redundant, the introduction of artificial intelligence has opened up a debate on what it means to be human, and climate change threatens the obliteration of the entire planet.

With such existential crises looming, what do spectacles, such as a dharna against a clerical error, demonstrate? They tell us that behind the hyper masculinity and bravado of these movements, they are merely attempts to avoid confronting difficult material questions and transposing them onto the cultural and spiritual plane, an endeavour that is bound to fail as material forces exert themselves in the shape of increased poverty, homelessness, unemployment and environmental destruction on a planetary scale. In other words, fascism is a form of surrender in front of the worst excesses of the status quo.

Lectures on tolerance or mocking those who identify with such movements is an important cathartic experience, but as a political strategy it is hopelessly inadequate. One cannot confront this threat without a popular political project that can inspire, and empower, ordinary people in the country. At some point, we will have to overcome the current mood of despondency and transform it into an affirmative process of building such an alternative. And we might have to do it very quickly, since we are running out of time.

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P.S.

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