

Pakistan: It is Right to Rebel - Where Can We Begin The New Journey?

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The task today is not to provide abstract slogans but to intimately attach ourselves to the unfolding of the class struggle, and reconstruct our horizons based on concrete social upheavals. It is only from within the space of these struggles that we can trace the hopes, courage and creativity of the working masses. As we participate in the great experiments of resistance and cooperation, we must withhold judgement on the trajectory these struggles take and the new anti-capitalist possibilities they open.

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End Times?

At a time in history when human expectations of the future are beginning to resemble sci-fi reality, COVID-19 has abruptly disrupted these fantasies. The manner in which the mightiest empire appears helpless in front of a virus makes for both a terrifying and humbling spectacle. The sight of the greatest military and economic power in human history, the United States, spectacularly failing to protect its own population, reveals the limitation of a system that privileges corporate interest and military domination over adequate investment in health care and education.

With the US as the horizon of desire for the rest of the world, it is not surprising that the vulnerabilities of Third World regarding investment in care were woefully exposed. The lack of adequate health facilities are compounded by the fact that a lockdown means food scarcity and unemployment for poorer sections of society. In pursuit of the mirage of unbridled development, Third World elites abdicated the responsibility of taking care of their citizens, making the current adjustment incredibly painful for the public.

It is clear that we are experiencing an intense feeling of loss of a world, a melting away of long held certainties. Inhabiting the end times can produce a subjectivity that can be both melancholic and inward-looking, suspending political action in the midst of pervasive confusion. Yet, before participating actively in political praxis, it is crucial to remember the frameworks and horizons that have lost their vitality. In other words, we must fix our vision on the elements that have died so that

we can bury them, thus clearing the way for the recommencement of radical thought.

Clearing the Way for Radical Thought

Three key certainties of Pakistan's ideological compasses need to be discarded. The first is the militaristic culture induced by a sense of pervasive insecurity combined with nostalgia for an imagined Muslim past. The paranoia of being besieged by enemies (both internal and external) stems out of our colonial history, with the state perpetually feeling threatened by its own subjects. As historian Mark Condos has shown in his book, *The Insecurity State*, the excessive resources allocated to the British Indian military stemmed from a deep unease with local populations. Militaristic violence became a recurrent language of communication between colonial officials and their Indian subjects.



Pakistan inherited its military infrastructure from the British colonial state

Pakistani elites inherited this infrastructure of the colonial state and used it with precision against political opponents, leading to widespread accusations of treason against their own citizenry. The postcolonial addition made by Pakistani elites is to rent out its military capacity to global powers, while also giving this militarised logic of governance an Islamic façade, imbining it with a sense of religious destiny to be fulfilled through Jihad.

Yet, the cost of our bloated military budget has exposed the inadequate attention paid to our health and education sectors, as well as leaving few funds for productive economic development. With COVID-19 and other epidemic and climate catastrophes on the horizon, we cannot afford to perpetuate fantasies of regional domination or carry the burden of bloated militaries that are more often used against our own people.

Second, we must give up on the notion that a return to civilian rule would mean a return to some form of normalcy. Even if one is able to get rid of the military-backed PTI regime, the two conventional parties, the PPP and the PML-N, do not have a substantial alternative vision to deal with the growing crisis of a purely parasitic form of capitalism. There seems to be a convergence of all political actors on imposing the IMF-plans, facilitating big industrialists and land mafias while repressing the question of land reforms.

Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, of PPP, and Maryam Nawaz, of PML-N, are widely viewed as the new faces of the traditional dynastic parties.

This is partly a result of the social classes that these parties represent, including the decadent feudal and industrial elites of our country that are only sustained through bailouts at the expense of the public. In the absence of a vision for a different form of social relations, all parties are reduced to mere managers of a broken system, thus blurring the dialectic between military and civilian rule that has sustained political antagonism for so long.

Finally, we must abandon the illusion of capitalist development that has been thrust upon us for the

past seventy years. In our desire to “catch-up” to the West, we have facilitated the country’s industrial elites while neglecting social sectors and repressing demands for wealth distribution. Although we were told that the generation of wealth at the top would trickle down in the form of jobs and taxes, we have instead witnessed the emergence of monstrous monopolies that have little regard for labour or environmental laws, and are notoriously efficient at escaping the tax net. The achievement of this “development” acquired after decades of subsidies to the elites is that we have not even managed to provide safe drinking water to citizens, with 40 percent of deaths occurring in Pakistan due to waterborne diseases.

The current government’s decision to hand out bailouts to the construction industry, which has the lowest rates of secure jobs, also exposes the limits of an imagination bounded by capitalism’s logic. We must begin to chart a different path that privileges meeting social needs through redistribution of wealth, rather than accruing more profits for the elites. It is only when we recognise that our political imagination is exhausted, and that we are caught in a repetitive cycle of destruction, that we will begin to confront the challenge of reimagining the very coordinates of our existence.

Where Can We Begin The New Journey?

A key passage that Marx quotes from Communist Manifesto in Capital Volume I ends with the following:

All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.

What was Marx trying to say when he wrote these lines? For Marx as well as for Lenin, Marxism was not a theory describing the processes of the economy, focusing on how much production, financialisation and industrial growth a society experiences. For them, economic relations are relations between people, relations between actually existing beings, which are formed by practical human activity. In the middle of this pandemic any political strategy and political program must start from this great lesson by two of the most formidable Marxist thinkers: “Man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.” We believe humankind is very near this realisation.

All over the world, a growing number of people are grasping this reality that Marx argued would be the result of the constant disorders and changes in capitalist production. Today, in France, USA, Italy, UK and many other countries, workers are forming committees, coalitions and organising general strikes. Last week in Lahore working class families protested against the unavailability of food. Doctors in Quetta protested against the unavailability of PPEs. As we stressed in our last article, the situation is going to be much worse for the working class in the coming months.

Some may argue that the conclusions that we are drawing from this crisis are unfounded, exaggerations or even not radical enough. But this emphasis on the inevitable triumph of human dignity and socialism must be our subjective position if we are to explore the latent possibilities of a better future laying beneath the spectacular decay of capitalism on display today. Lenin provides a lesson in such a strategic optimism in the midst of despair.

“We who are members of the Marxist movement may not live to see the world revolution”. Lenin wrote these lines only a month before the Russian Revolution. Despite his grim personal doubt, Lenin was actively organising his party and writing his famous book, State and Revolution, that would imagine a post-capitalist order and trace its development within the grim reality of the present. Despite his personal uncertainty Lenin wholeheartedly organised the masses in that period.

This is how we as Marxists must think, recognising the contingency of the situation while ceaselessly preparing for the inevitable battles.

Vladimir Lenin was a leader of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and one of the foremost Marxist thinkers of the 20th century

The Coming Storms

We can already see the unravelling of the system, as it lays bare its incapacity to care for the citizens. Consider the horrific scenes last week from Quetta. Doctors and other health workers were protesting against the dangerous shortage of PPE. Fears amplified with the tragic death of Dr. Usama Riaz, a young medical professional who lost his life by catching the virus on the frontlines. Yet, the Balochistan government responded to the genuine concerns of health workers by unleashing police violence on them and arresting a number of young doctors. The arrest of frontline warriors in the fight against an ongoing pandemic makes it difficult to discern whether those at the helm are more cruel or incompetent. Both are unpardonable in the midst of an emergency.

What we are witnessing is a sharpening of the struggle between the managers of this defaulting system and those whose existence is now at stake. It would be naïve to immediately present alternative proposals without taking stock of the development of the workers movement. Thus, the task today is not to provide abstract slogans but to intimately attach ourselves to the unfolding of the class struggle, and reconstruct our horizons based on concrete social upheavals.

It is only from within the space of these struggles that we can trace the hopes, courage and creativity of the working masses. As we participate in the great experiments of resistance and cooperation, we must withhold judgement on the trajectory these struggles take and the new anti-capitalist possibilities they open. In these turbulent times, full of contingency and pregnant with multiple possibilities, we should hold dear the eternal maxim that guides the action of the oppressed, "It is Right to Rebel".

Ammar Ali Jan and Zahid Ali

See also on ESSF (article 53408), [How is Lenin Relevant for Politics in Pakistan Today? - Opening up space to develop a new hypothesis for the Left](#)

P.S.

- Pakistan Left Review. April 15, 2020:
<https://pakleftreview.com/2020/04/15/it-is-right-to-rebel/>

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