

Gilgit Baltistan (Pakistan): The Hypocrisy of Baba Jan's Imprisonment

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The degree of tacit sympathy — explicitly fostered by the state — that has flooded the airwaves for people who slaughtered or tried to slaughter their fellow Pakistanis is rarely afforded to those engaged in nonviolent struggles for people's rights. There are few cases which illustrate this hypocritical standard of justice in Pakistan better than that of Baba Jan.



If one goes by some of the public response to the televised appearances of TTP's Ehsanullah Ehsan and ISIS recruit Noreen Leghari, there is something about the possibility of rehabilitating jihadi militants that can turn the most hawkish of Pakistani politicians and right-wingers into reconciliatory peaceniks. Sadly, the degree of tacit sympathy — explicitly fostered by the state — that has flooded the airwaves for people who slaughtered or tried to slaughter their fellow Pakistanis is rarely afforded to those engaged in nonviolent struggles for people's rights.

There are few cases which illustrate this hypocritical standard of justice in Pakistan better than that of Baba Jan, Gilgit-Baltistan's famed prisoner of conscience. For the better part of six years, Baba Jan, a founding member and activist of the left-wing Awami Workers Party, has been behind bars on a life sentence for 'terrorism' charges. His crime? Demanding rights for Hunza's poor and displaced.

When a deadly landslide submerged several villages in Attabad in early 2010, Baba Jan was a local activist who had long been trying to urge action on the impending consequences of climate change and resource exploitation on the local population. In 2011, after months of an indifferent government response to the disaster, Baba Jan organised the displaced affectees in a movement to demand the long-delayed payment of their stipulated compensation. On 12 August 2011, at a demonstration during a visit of the GB Chief Minister to the Attabad Lake, police opened fire on protesting IDPs, killing a father, Sherullah Baig and son, Afzal. The news of the killings sparked angry riots throughout the region, resulting in damage to several government buildings.

Despite the fact that Baba Jan was not even present where the rioting took place, he was targeted as vengeance for his activist past. In September 2011, he and several other activists were arrested,

booked under the draconian Anti-Terrorist Act and thrown behind bars, where he was tortured and denied medical treatment. Despite his victimisation, Baba Jan quietly continued his political organising efforts in prison, uniting previously-polarised Shia and Sunni prisoners to demand humane living conditions in jail.

In 2014, despite the complete absence of any evidence of his complicity, he and eleven others were sentenced to 71 years each in prison for terrorism and arson. In the meantime, a judicial inquiry that had been ordered into the killings of the protestors was covered up, and the police officer responsible for the murders exonerated and promoted.

Miscarriages of justice are commonplace in Pakistan, but Baba Jan's principled stance and reputation for integrity sparked a popular movement. Dozens of protests calling for his release took place in Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan and cities across the world, even prompting prominent intellectuals like Noam Chomsky and Tariq Ali to call for his release. However, police threats of slapping sedition charges on local activists meant protests could not easily continue locally in Hunza.

In May 2015, Baba Jan announced his decision to contest elections from behind bars for the Hunza-VI constituency of the Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly, from an AWP ticket. Despite the fact that he could not personally take part, historic scenes were witnessed in the Hunza Valley during his campaign, which turned into something of a mini-uprising. Thousands of his young and working class supporters spilled out into the streets of the Valley under the red and white flag of the AWP, in a campaign funded entirely by grassroots donations and featuring participation from thousands of women, unprecedented in a region where women have historically not been part of the political process. Through prose, poetry and song, his supporters boldly raised important issues ranging from class exploitation to GB's place in the federation, to the classist electoral process, to gender equality and inter-faith harmony.

Ultimately, the PML-N candidate (Mir Ghazanfar, from the centuries-old royal family of Hunza) used millions in handouts, administrative muscle as well as pre-poll rigging tactics to ensure his victory, while Baba Jan stood a close second, defeating the candidates of mainstream parties like the PPP, PTI and others. A year later in April 2016, when Mir Ghazanfar vacated the seat to assume the post of GB governor, the authorities did not again take any chances with Baba Jan; his candidacy was rejected by the Returning Officer at the ruling party's objection. In June 2016, the Chief Court of GB — comprising of judges handpicked by the prime minister — upheld his conviction and sentenced him to a further 40 years of imprisonment.

Why has Baba Jan been targeted so ruthlessly — worse than many actual terrorists — by the Pakistani state simply for his political activism? In the first instance, Baba Jan is a socialist; a fact that on its own is enough for the state to regard one as inherently suspect. His incarceration is simply another chapter in the long history of the violent repression of the Pakistani Left by the feudal, capitalist and military-bureaucratic elite.

Secondly, Baba Jan is from Gilgit-Baltistan, a region where resistance politics has long been policed and criminalised. As the Pakistani state sees GB as part of the disputed region of Kashmir, it refrains from constitutionally recognising the territory as part of the country — the result being that GB's residents have for decades been governed without parliamentary representation, largely through neo-colonial bureaucratic diktat from Islamabad. In the strategic calculus of Islamabad's policymakers, a popular and vocal activist from GB who had consistently spoken for the rights and autonomy of the region's people was much more convenient behind bars.

Finally, as a vocal critic of the corruption of the ruling elites of GB and Pakistan, Baba Jan was becoming a thorn in the side for those wishing to profit from the multibillion-dollar CPEC project.

The civil-military elite of GB and Islamabad understood well that his freedom would mean the magnification of the concerns of the region's ordinary people, greater demands for accountability and fewer opportunities for the mass corruption or natural resource exploitation that were on the agenda.

Cases like Baba Jan's illustrate the absurdities inherent in the state's anti-terror strategy. How is it that hardened killers who have openly admitted to the massacre of thousands can be deemed 'reformed' on the basis of a few strategically-useful confessions, yet peaceful and widely-loved activists who have never picked up a weapon in their lives can be imprisoned for life under terrorism laws? On what basis is the state attempting to 'de-radicalise' society when it organises interviews and university tours for TTP and IS operatives yet silences the very voices — like Baba Jan's — that could possibly provide a nonviolent, egalitarian and non-sectarian political alternative to a society infected with violent fanaticism?

Again and again Bab Jan has proven his popularity with youth of GB, in 2015 he received the second highest votes without even launching a campaign. His only fault it seems is his nonviolent opposition of the state's atrocities in GB.

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P.S.

• Youth Dissent. September 25, 2020:
<http://youthdissent.com/2020/09/25/the-hypocrisy-of-baba-jans-imprisonment/>