

# **'It's crucial to fight the far right in Pakistan and the region'**

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**Interview on the political situation in Bangladesh, Pakistan and India given, the 30 August 2024, by Farooq Tariq to the Brazilian magazine *Revista Movimento*.**

*Though it is one of the most dynamic regions of world capitalism, the Brazilian public knows little about South Asia. But the recent student rebellion in Bangladesh has brought to the fore this region marked by instability, which includes populous countries such as Bangladesh, Pakistan and India.*

To find out more about politics in the region, Israel Dutra interviewed veteran leader Farooq Tariq, one of the biggest names on the Pakistani left. Tariq is also a leader of the Fourth International with whom the Socialist Left Movement (MES/PSOL) have maintained fraternal relations for many years, with leading members such as Pedro Fuentes and Luciana Genro taking part in events in Pakistan.

**Israel Dutra - Can you tell us a bit about the current political situation in Pakistan?**

**Farooq Tariq** - Pakistan today presents a picture of a bubbling cauldron marked by a deepening economic crisis, on the one hand, and social and political uprisings in its peripheries, on the other hand. This is further exacerbated by issues of climate change that present an existential threat to the country. While the overall political situation presents a bleak picture marked by the military's complete control over the state and society, it is encouraging to see that social and political movements in its peripheries, such as in Balochistan province, give a glimmer of hope for change. The political movement in Pakistan's Balochistan province is directed against the authoritarian control and elite capture of the Pakistani state used against the ethnic Baloch population. Despite heavy repression and a complete black out of these protests by mainstream media, the political movement in Balochistan has attracted a lot of attention from young people and continues to inspire other ethnicities in the rest of the provinces.

Pakistan's 12<sup>th</sup> general elections, held on February 8, 2024, resulted in a right-wing coalition government supported by the powerful military-intelligence establishment, which may offer temporary political stability amid ongoing crises. Independent candidates affiliated with the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party of jailed former Prime Minister Imran Khan won the most directly elected seats, but failed to secure a majority or form a coalition. The Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) and Pakistan People's Party (PPP) won fewer seats, but were bolstered by reserved seats under constitutional quotas. Shehbaz Sharif of the PML-N was selected as prime minister, while Asif Ali Zardari of the PPP became president. The coalition faces tough economic decisions, including expanding tax collection and cutting fuel subsidies to secure an IMF bailout.

The new coalition government in Pakistan will require significant support from the military and intelligence services to manage the challenges posed by Khan's supporters and the country's deep economic troubles. Despite calls for the military to stay out of politics, it remains the most powerful institution in Pakistan, with a strong influence on governance, foreign policy, and national security.

Khan's criticism has weakened public support for the military, even among previously pro-military groups, pushing the armed forces to work more closely with politicians to preserve their dominance. The military's historical interference has contributed to economic stagnation. But this time, the threat from Khan's movement may deter the military from toppling the new Sharif government, which could prove resilient in the face of such attempts.

The country faces a substantial external debt of \$123 billion and must repay \$78 billion by 2026. Pakistan's economy suffers from chronic budget and trade deficits, low tax revenues, and insufficient export growth, with foreign currency reserves barely covering a few months of imports. The country has relied heavily on IMF loans, borrowing 23 times since 1958, primarily to cover past debts rather than to invest in economic development.

Jihadist terrorist groups, initially tolerated for use in conflicts with India, have become a major security threat within Pakistan. Since 2000, the country has endured over 16,600 terrorist attacks, resulting in nearly 68,000 deaths, with 1080 fatalities in 2023 alone. The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is currently the most significant threat, exacerbated by the return of the Afghan Taliban to power, who continue to support al-Qaeda and shelter the TTP. Pakistan's new government has pledged to implement a comprehensive counter-terrorism plan targeting all extremist groups, though past efforts have fallen short. This time, the need for economic progress might drive more decisive action, potentially opening the door to improved relations and trade with India, which could help mitigate Pakistan's economic challenges.

### **Could you elaborate on how the phenomenon of the far right manifests itself in Pakistan and the region?**

The far-right in Pakistan manifests itself in the form of religious extremist and Islamist groups, including the TTP — a far-right religious group wielding enormous influence, socially and politically. It is important to understand that right and far-right forces in Pakistan have always been in cahoots with Pakistan's powerful military establishment since the Afghan Jihad of the 1980's. It was Pakistan's third notorious dictator, General Zia ul Haq, who mainstreamed far-right forces through particular legislation and giving them political and social platforms. Zia's policies, as various scholars have noted, resulted in the Deobandization of state — the Deoband sect being one of the radical and literalist offshoots of mainstream Islam. This is why Deobandi factions wield enormous influence through religious rhetoric, focusing on issues such as blasphemy laws and anti-Ahmadiyya sentiment. These groups have at times demonstrated their power by mobilising large protests. Some of these factions have also been used by the military establishment to drum up political opposition against specific mainstream political parties. An example of this occurred in the 2018 election, when the PML-N had a falling out with the military establishment and the latter used the TTP to divide voters in Punjab province, which was the main centre of PML-N voters.

Sectarian violence between Sunni and Shia Muslims is also a major manifestation of the far-right in Pakistan. Groups like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) and Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) have long targeted Shia communities, leading to cycles of violence and retaliation. These sectarian tensions are often exacerbated by regional dynamics, particularly the rivalry between Sunni-majority Saudi Arabia and Shia-majority Iran.

In neighbouring India, the situation is not dissimilar. The far-right is closely associated with Hindu nationalism, particularly the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its political wing, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). This movement promotes Hindutva ideology, advocates for a Hindu state and often targets religious minorities, especially Muslims and Christians.

### **What has been the impact of the student uprising in Bangladesh?**

While attention has largely focused on the quota protests, a litany of grievances had piled up against the Hasina Wajid government in Bangladesh. Under Hasina's rule, Bangladesh has seen GDP growth — but this has not translated into economic well-being for many Bangladeshis. Lack of opportunities, high unemployment rates among youth and soaring inflation have been ongoing sources of tension. Meanwhile, despite the Awami League espousing a zero-tolerance policy towards corruption, money laundering, bribery and nepotism, scandals have dogged government ministers. Since its landslide victory in 2008, the Awami League has eroded the country's democracy. For example, in 2011 the government ended an arrangement that allowed a 90-day caretaker administration, consisting of technocrats, to organise elections and oversee transfers of power. Suppression of dissent has also grown. The harassment and detention of activists, opposition figures and human rights defenders have become more frequent. Meanwhile, there has been criminalisation of any criticism of the government, including satire and social media posts.

In my assessment, overthrowing Hasina's government has resulted in a significant vacuum in Bangladesh, which is likely to be filled by the military establishment and religious forces. It is important to remember that the student protests in Bangladesh were not organised; they were spontaneous student uprisings that did not have the backing of any political party. The two organised forces in Bangladesh in the aftermath of the protests remain the military and religious political parties. It is highly likely that the political landscape will be controlled by both. It is very akin to what happened in Egypt in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. The protests saw the end of decades of dictatorial rule by Hosni Mubarak, but once he was done away with the right-wing al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn (Muslim Brotherhood) came to power, which was later overthrown by the military. The cycle was then completed. The people protested and staged a revolution against the Mubarak dictatorship but ended up under dictatorial rule again because the only organised forces were either religious parties or the military establishment.

### **What is your assessment of the Narendra Modi government in India?**

The recent election results in India marked a significant shift in the country's political landscape. Narendra Modi's BJP lost its outright majority for the first time in a decade, with the opposition making a strong comeback. Despite Modi's re-election as prime minister, his power is perceived to have diminished as he now relies on coalition partners to form government. This election was seen as pushback against Modi's authoritarian style of governance, which has been criticised for undermining democracy, stifling dissent and concentrating power.

To understand Modi and his BJP, it is important to understand its parent organisation, the RSS. The RSS has followed a methodical and strategic approach to its long-term vision since its early days, particularly in Gujarat. By the 1940s, the RSS had expanded significantly in the state, with membership growing rapidly. In the 1960s, RSS leaders began promoting a narrative of aggressive Hindu masculinity, which contributed to growing Hindu-Muslim tensions. This culminated in violent riots in 1969, marked by large-scale violence against Muslims and sexual assaults against Muslim women. Modi, who joined the RSS as a young boy, was heavily influenced by its hardline religious nationalism. By the late 1980s, he had become an important figure in bridging the RSS and the BJP, and played key roles in promoting Hindu nationalist causes, including the campaign to build a temple on the site of the Babri Mosque, which was eventually destroyed by Hindu extremists in 1992.

In recent decades, the RSS has increasingly influenced mainstream Indian politics, particularly through its close association with the BJP. The RSS has leveraged its extensive network to mobilize Hindu voters and impact key political and educational decisions. Under BJP leadership since 2014, the RSS has appointed university leaders, revised textbooks to reflect Hindu majoritarian views, and been consulted on significant policy matters. Despite recent attempts by the BJP to distance itself

from the RSS, the latter's grassroots network remains crucial. The future of India's democracy, with its multicultural and secular traditions, faces challenges from this dominant Hindu nationalist agenda.

**You are one of the major contemporary references of the Fourth International. Could you tell us a bit about your background?**

I was a left-wing student activist at University of Punjab, where I was elected president of the students union in the Applied Psychology department. I help lead several battles against religious fanatics and had to leave the country after one of my article exposed the conspiracy between the right-wing leadership of PPP and the military general at the end of 1977. I spent 8 years in exile and then came back to Pakistan, despite having the option to stay in the Netherlands as a citizen. I became general secretary of the Labour Party Pakistan and later of the Awami Workers Party, from 1997 to 2019. I left AWP to form a new political party Haqooq-e-Khalq Party (HKP, People's Rights Party). I am the president of HKP. I am also the general secretary of the Pakistan Kissan Rabita Committee (PKRC, Peasants Coordination Committee). PKRC is the only organisation in Pakistan affiliated to La Via Campesina. I also head the Asia Europe People's Forum Asia Team, and am involved in several other regional and international platforms.

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- Source: first published in [Revista Movimento](#). English translation [Links](#).