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As a free man, Baba Jan can be more beneficial than as a political prisoner

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Languishing in Gahkuch jail in Gilgit-Baltistan, progressive political leader Baba Jan's appeal to the prime minister of Pakistan to allow medical examination for cardiac disease has gone unnoticed.

Baba Jan is undisputedly the most popular political leader of Gilgit-Baltistan; he is serving a life sentence on multiple counts of concocted political cases. Baba Jan, along with 11 political workers, was sent to jail in 2010 for raising a voice against the atrocities committed by local administration during a protest staged by Attabad disaster affectees in Aliabad, Hunza. During the peaceful protest a police officer ordered one of his constables to open fire on the protesters; this action led to the death of a man and his young son, who were demanding compensation from the local government for their losses due to the Attabad disaster. The disaster had rendered a dozen families homeless and landless as the village was completely destroyed.

Baba Jan who was not present during the protest on that particular tragic day was arrested by the police from his native village of Hini, and a number of fake cases were established against him by the then government of Gilgit-Baltistan. Baba Jan has neither been a sectarian political leader nor a myopic nationalist. He has been an ardent supporter of an equalitarian, enlightened and progressive society and his political teaching can be of great value for establishing peace and religious harmony in Gilgit-Baltistan.

As a free man, Baba Jan can be more beneficial than as a political prisoner if the government has any vision to see peace in the region. The political ideas of Baba Jan were misinterpreted to position him as a hardcore territorial nationalist by his political opponents, and he was dubbed a traitor and an anti-state element. If you happen to interact with Baba Jan you will find in him a refined political visionary, an advocate of peace and a patriot. I have found him an intellectual, a man of political integrity and someone much needed by the downtrodden people of GB and Pakistan.

I hope that the prime minister of Pakistan will pay heed to Baba Jan's appeal and the life of this visionary political leader is saved and his case is investigated by an independent judicial team under the direct supervision of the prime minister of Pakistan. Justice is what must make 'New' Pakistan different from the 'Old' one but what is unfolding is important to note.

The politics of the 'new' is turning old; the 'new' of course has never been the end of the 'old' in our political arena. What looks new today is bound to get old tomorrow and the process of the wearing and tearing of the new is really quick in our case. And it is not only the political slogan of the 'new' that gets old too soon, it is also our popular ideals are too ephemeral to sustain the winds of change. Our political history is replete with slogans of change but in all instances the politics of change gets

subsumed by political expediencies and opportunism.

The much-trodden path of the leaders of change never ends up at a new destination of political enlightenment. There are many reversals and reversions during the journey. You may call them U-turns but this is not only about a particular political government. In reality, there have always been reversals and revisions on the bumpy paths of political transformation in Pakistan. The slogan of change is neither new nor does it get old. What it does do is take us to some elevated new political goal. We have all the reasons to be sceptical of promises of change if we have even a modicum of knowledge of our political history.

As a nation our resilience is exemplary when it comes to navigating the challenges of our own political choices. But this resilience is more about our habit of forgetting history, which allows the mantra of the new to thrive as a political slogan.

As in the past, this time too it seems as if the new political cocktail, the hodgepodge composition of variegated political interests, is losing its governing bottle. The bottle may get shattered by its own constituents because they seem to be too swollen now to be contained in a bottle. The PML-Q has shown early signs of political wrangling within the ruling coalition, and there are similar political gestures coming from the Balochistan Awami Party. In Karachi too we may see the resurrection of the old MQM - and that too with political vengeance. These political parties have experience and the tendency to strike deals with the powerful to regain their lost glory; and they cannot be trusted as custodians of a 'New' Pakistan.

The ruling government will be left with no options other than a bunch of power-aspiring moralists and religious parties and outfits if it has to continue its hold on power. The bottle can be koshered by a simple edict of our demagogues of morality who can go to any extent for a power-sharing deal. This coalition will not be parliamentary anymore but a makeshift political arrangement to keep parliament besieged to the street power of extremists. The incumbent government must strive to find political visionaries with integrity and courage to fight for a real New Pakistan. Like Baba Jan, there are a number of unsung political visionaries in Pakistan who deserve to be the real architects of an inclusive and just Pakistan.

Pakistan is surrounded by internal and external challenges, in particular along its border areas, due to the dwindling writ of the state and an increasing sense of deprivation. We have had enough of wars and conflicts; it is time to ensure peace and harmony to safeguard our political interests. The government must reach out to genuine political workers and local leaders rather than relying on opportunists and moralists if the objective is to build an inclusive and peaceful Pakistan. Balochistan and Gilgit-Baltistan are the real future of a stable, democratic and prosperous Pakistan because of their natural resources and geostrategic importance and their significance for the success of CPEC.

It is strange that the most popular political leader of Gilgit-Baltistan faces state persecution at a time when he must be consulted for building peace at the gateway of CPEC. Baba Jan has political charisma, strong and well-entrenched political principles, integrity, fame and acceptability across all ideological and political groups in Gilgit-Baltistan and he can be a great asset as an ambassador of peace and harmony.

The cocktail of our current politics is driven by the ecstasy of being in power rather than the fear of the people who caused them to be in power. Does popular will hold any water in this country? This is the perennial question we keep asking but there have never been definite answers to such silly questions. Those who dare ask such silly questions are all Baba Jans and they have to face the wrath of power.

Like their compatriots elsewhere in 'New' Pakistan, the people of Gilgit-Baltistan are eager to see a real political transformation. Baba Jan is a symbol of this political transformation like many other political heroes of this country whose place is not in jail because they live in the hearts of the people. The prime minister must take notice of the miseries heaped upon Baba Jan and allow him the right to a medical examination.

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P.S.

• The News International. February 08,2019:

<https://www.thenews.com.pk/amp/429096-baba-jan-s-appeal>

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