

Pakistan: My journey was no different than others

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Activists have to pay the price for speaking the truth

I take pride in having fought against four military dictatorships. I participated in the students' demonstrations against Gen Ayub in 1968-69. During Gen Yahya's martial law, I joined protests and strongly condemned the military operation in East Pakistan.

Gen Zia's reign was particularly tough for me. I had to spend eight years in exile. I was chased for organising demonstrations against Gen Zia's dictatorship and for writing articles criticising his policies. In 1977-1978, I was warned that I had been spotted by the regime's informers and was likely to be arrested and subjected to state excesses. I had no option but to go in exile in the Netherlands where I would remain 1978 to '86.

During Gen Musharraf's rule, I was arrested 12 times between 1999 and 2009. In addition, numerous raids were made to my house by state agencies for raising human rights issues including the right to assemble, the right to associate and restoration of democracy.

This does not mean that I did not face any problems during the civilian governments of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif. I had to pay the price for speaking the truth and challenging the wrong policies of these governments as well. Between 1988 and 1999, I was jailed several times for formation of trade unions and associations and challenging undemocratic norms.

"During Gen Musharraf's rule, I was arrested 12 times between 1999 and 2009. In addition, numerous raids were made to my house by state agencies for raising human rights issues including the right to assemble, the right to associate and restoration of democracy," says activist Farooq Tariq.

I have established several platforms and organised people to struggle for their rights. I have always preached that union is strength. I also believe in collective wisdom and never try to force my decisions on others. I have served as general secretary of the Pakistan Anti-Denationalisation Action Committee in 1990, as founding general secretary of the Labour Education Foundation in 1991 and been a founding member of the Women Workers' Help Line. I helped form Pakistan Trade Unions Action Committee in 1993 and was a founding member of the committee. This, later led to the formation of All Pakistan Workers' Confederation.

I have been associated with the peasants' and farmers' movements since 1970 and played a role in 2001 in starting the tenants' movement at Okara Military Farms for their right to land. The movement has resulted in the tenants retaining possession of 13,000 acres of land.

I have organised many national and international conferences on land rights, food sovereignty and economic services for small farmers. I was the organiser of Lahore Kissan Conference in 2007.

I have also been a journalist. One of my articles as the Punjab correspondent of weekly *Alfatah*, Karachi, criticising Gen Zia towards the end of 1977, led to the closure of the paper and I had to leave the country. I also served as the founding editor of monthly *The Struggle* in Amsterdam (1980), editor of daily *Business Report*, Faisalabad, (1987-88), editor of monthly *Mazdoor Jeddoh* (1989, Lahore) and editor of weekly *Mazdoor Jeddoh*.

Farooq Tariq is the general secretary of the Pakistan Kissan Rabita Committee, a network of peasant organisations in Pakistan.

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