

Floods in Pakistan: Where is the 'International Community' for the imperialized zones of the world-system?

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The world's brief concern for the plight of more than 35 million Pakistanis deprived of their homes, livelihoods and dignity by this summer's unprecedented monsoon-related floods was summed up in late August by a suitably passionate video appeal by Secretary-General of the United Nations, Antonio Gutierrez. He implored the 'international community' to step up and take responsibility; as he rightly noted, Pakistan has contributed a pittance to the global emissions that drive climate change, and it is not 'just' for the country's long suffering people to be left isolated.

Of course the UN does not deploy terms like empire and reparations, which a truly meaningful message would have contained. Mr. Gutierrez subsequently travelled to Pakistan on September 8, presumably to try and sustain what little media and donor attention the floods had garnered. As it turned out, Queen Elizabeth II passed away on the same day. Unsurprisingly, the imperial monarch's death became a global concern overnight, while Pakistan's colonial peripheries faded even further from the public eye. Let alone other bilateral and multilateral donors, the UN itself has to date disbursed only a small fraction of the US\$160 million that it promised to raise for flood relief in late August.

A spade, as the proverbial saying goes, ought to be called a spade. Over the past two decades, at least some of the underlying structural causes of global warming and climate change have been identified and articulated, time and again, most notably at gatherings of the world's richest and most powerful people. But even where emissions targets are agreed, the biggest polluters - western imperialist powers - are simply not doing enough. There is now very little chance that we will contain warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, and as the Pakistan example demonstrates, there will be more and more hell to pay for the historically imperialized zones of the world-system.

Of course, there is much that is not even acknowledged, nay, spoken of, within the so-called 'international community'. Like the fact that our political-economic system, the global regime of capital accumulation, is based on the deliberate expropriation of working people and the natural resources that sustain them. In Pakistan, the rest of South Asia and much of postcolonial Africa/Latin America, there is no forest, water body, landed plain or mountainous highland that is safe from violent grabs by a nexus that comprises local big men, state functionaries, 'development' practitioners, powerful states (western and increasingly non-western powers like China) and multinational corporations.

That more than half of Pakistan is inundated certainly has to do with unprecedented monsoon rains, particularly in the ethnic peripheries of Sindh and Balochistan. But the fallouts of mega infrastructure like dams, canals and drains, made through WB and ADB monies, and imbued with British-era colonial engineering logics motivated by the desire to conquer nature, are plain to see. As

is the fact that real estate moguls and big construction lobbies are running riot across the country, thereby further eroding already fragile eco-systems upon which millions of people rely for their livelihoods. As Rosa Luxemburg said: 'A natural economy... confronts the requirements of capitalism at every turn with rigid barriers. Capitalism must therefore always and everywhere fight a battle of annihilation against every historical form of natural economy that it encounters'.

In my recently published book *The Struggle for Hegemony in Pakistan: Fear, Desire and Revolutionary Horizons* (Pluto Press, 2022), I make an argument for a rehabilitation of an internationalist politics across the world's most populous and youthful regions of postcolonial South Asia and sub Saharan Africa. The question of ecology forces us to recognise the imperative of such a progressive alternative, what with the political and intellectual mainstream - in Pakistan and most of the world - beholden to what I call the politics of fear and desire, typically embodied by populist strongmen like Imran Khan and entrenched military-industrial-media establishments more generally.

Indeed, most contemporary politics resembles a grotesque race to the bottom, with political contenders and ideological state apparatuses attempting to outdo one another in propagating hate against the proverbial 'other' whilst completely obfuscating the systemic and systematic dispossession of large segments of humanity alongside despoliation of nature.

It is worth being reminded that floods in Pakistan were preceded by an excruciating heatwave across much of the western subcontinent which began as early as late March. Both during the record-breaking high temperatures and during the first few weeks of the monsoon, Pakistan's political mainstream - including big parties, the omnipotent military establishment and the corporate media - were the least bit concerned, palace intrigues instead hogging the spotlight.

Indeed, if the 'international community' has demonstrated far more bark than bite despite the passionate pleas of individuals like Antonio Gutierrez, larger-than-life political figures like Imran Khan as well as the army's top brass spend their time, energy and resources on securing their parochial interests rather than offering serious and clear messaging around climate change and meaningful medium and long term strategies to redress it.

The bitter truth is that ruling classes both domestic and global have wilfully exacerbated the climate crisis, and will continue to do so in the short-run. While advocacy efforts at international fora are certainly important, a much more substantial politics must be forged undergirded by the anti-colonial internationalism of iconic figures like Frantz Fanon but also reflected in meaningful resistance to violent accumulation at the molecular level. It is thus essential to mobilise with indigenous communities fighting natural resources grabs, squatter and slum dwellers fighting against property developers and the local state, and myopic, profit-oriented 'mega development' more generally.

Furthermore, politics must transcend liberal guilt and appeals to the 'good intentions' of the 'international community'. Let us not be deluded about how the latter propagates imperialist war under the guise of 'humanitarian intervention' or strangulates postcolonial economies through the age-old weapon of debt. Pakistan's current imbroglio is in fact as much about IMF and other creditors' imposition of crushing austerity as it is about climate change.

Our political imaginaries must premise far more revolutionary horizons than prototypical invocations of 'rule of law' and 'good governance' which represent the same colonial 'middle class' values that are at the root of the endless crisis. This is not just an academic concern, and time is running short.

[Donations are on-going](#) for Pakistani citizens impacted by the floods.

[Aasim Sajjad Akhtar](#) is Professor of Political Economy at the National Institute of Pakistan Studies, Quaid-e-Azam University and a founder of the Awami Workers Party (AWP). His research has focused on state theory, informality, colonial history, rise of the middle classes and social movements in Pakistan. His latest book is [The Struggle for Hegemony in Pakistan: Fear, Desire and Revolutionary Horizons \(Pluto Press, 2022\)](#).

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