

Pakistan Left - “We are not failed people. Will keep the mission going”

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“It is also not correct to say that Left had not been successful on electoral front because National Awami Party of Wali Khan bagged majority seats in Balochistan and North West Frontier Province and turned out to be a successful party there with mass following.”

I was little confused the morning I left my home for the office of renowned constitutional expert and senior lawyer of the Supreme Court of Pakistan, Abid Hasan Minto, to interview him. Having a legal career spanning over 50 years, he is also a literary critic and a Leftwing civic and political leader. “Law is our family profession,” he legitimately boasts of while recalling his ancestors and their contributions.

I stepped into his office reluctantly as I could not prepare myself properly to interview a man of his stature. A soft and sweet Minto greeted me in his immaculately clean but a file-loaded office. “Do you smoke,” he asked me. “Yes I do, but I had left my cigarettes in my car as I thought you might not allow smoking in your office,” I replied sheepishly. He went for his table draw, brought out a pack of cigarettes and lighted one for me and one for himself. The milieu changed at once as I found myself very comfortable sitting in front of a friendly 80-year-old lawyer who had seen an epoch of political and social struggle in Pakistan. I listened to him in amazement as his dexterity transported me to a past full of struggle. He narrated, like a professional lawyer with dates and events on his finger tips, the turmoil, successes and failures of a movement of which he was an integral part — the struggle of Pakistani Left.

Mazhar Khan Jadoon

Mazhar Khan Jadoon - Tell us about the Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case. And do you think it proved to be a blow from which the Communist Party (CP) never recovered?

Abid Hasan Minto – General Akbar was the mastermind of the Rawalpindi conspiracy. He had tried to woo some armed forces officers to form a group to stage a military coup. The government also became suspicious of his moves and he came under the watch of the intelligence agencies.

Yes, it is true that the Communist Party of Pakistan came under immense pressure from the Liaquat Ali Khan’s government after the conspiracy was foiled in 1951, but it is not correct to say that the Communist Party never recovered from the blow. The CP withstood the turmoil and despite all

depression and repression, literary figures associated with the party kept writing and kept running publications successfully. The Pakistan Times, Imroz and other progressive publications with Left leaning played an independent and democratic role in a hostile milieu.

The Communist Party was not allowed to function openly as a political party. Arrest warrants had been issued for all the top leaders of the party — all the members of the party's central committee had gone underground. Ordinary workers and even sympathisers were arrested, beaten and sent to jails. General Akbar, Brig. Lateef and Faiz Ahmed Faiz were also arrested. General elections in the Punjab provincial assembly were going on at that time and CP was a legal party. Though the fallout of the Rawalpindi conspiracy restrained the activities of the party and gave a tough time to its leadership, it could not suppress the spirit and ideology of the party.

What was the link between Azad Pakistan Party and the CP? Was it a party decision to form Azad Pakistan Party?

Well, I think it was a party decision to support the formation of Azad Pakistan Party. Though the Communist Party leadership facilitated Azad Pakistan Party, it was not a project of the Communist Party. The Azad Pakistan Party was founded in November 1949 by Mian Iftikharuddin. The party, however, failed to make an impact and later merged with the National Awami Party.

After the ban, did CP cadre en block joined Azad Pakistan Party or if the cadre entered some other organisations too in West Pakistan. We are not talking about East Pakistan here?

No. It is not correct to say that the Communist Party cadre en block joined Azad Pakistan Party or some other organisations. The CP was not a well-knit and organised party at that time. Mostly it worked underground with minimum contacts with party leaders and workers. Many party leaders did not join the Azad Pakistan Party, though some members decided to join hands with the Azad Pakistan Party in their individual capacity.

When the National Awami Party was formed, Azad Pakistan Party (NAP) joined it and dissolved itself. What happened with the CP?

Yes, it is true that Azad Pakistan Party dissolved itself and became part of the National Awami Party. But all these developments could not dent the Communist Party which kept its identity and structure intact. The CP's underground apparatus kept functioning, staying in touch with the party leadership and workers across the country. It stayed as it was.

Also, National Student Federation (NSF) had emerged in the meantime. Was NSF mere a name change, to avoid ban, for DSF (Democratic Students Federation). Or if NSF was a development independent of DSF/CP?

The Democratic Students Federation was formed in Rawalpindi in 1949 and I joined it as an active member. DSF was a direct project of the CP. Syed Ali Imam organized it in Karachi from where it spread to other parts of the country including Multan, Faisalabad and Lahore. DSF organised a Punjab Conference in Lahore which was participated in by a large number of party workers and students from all over the country. DSF was banned in 1954, but it continued to function. DSF organized an All Pakistan Students Conference in Karachi and Muslim Student Federation (MSF) also participated in it. The DSF, MSF and some other student organizations joined hands and gave birth to National Student Federation (NSF) in Karachi. Though NSF was not conceived by the CP, the party later adopted it.

How did the Moscow-Beijing split influenced the Left in West Pakistan? Was it the case

that pro-Moscow faction stayed with NAP-Wali while pro-Beijing went along NAP-Bhashani?

The Moscow-Beijing split in 1960 was a worldwide phenomena. The Pakistani Communist movement had to face deep splits in its ranks due to the Sino-Soviet conflict. Things turned out differently in Pakistan. East Pakistan CP split into two and the West Pakistan party split into Sindh and Punjab. Mazdoor Kissan Party was a pro-China group. They remained part of the Wali Khan group for a long time. Actually local political dynamics and not the Moscow-Beijing split influenced the split in West Pakistan CP.

What was the attitude of both these factions towards Ayub-dictatorship?

The Communist Party was always against dictatorship in any form and all the factions opposed the Ayub dictatorship. Though some pro-Beijing elements in the CP supported and followed the Beijing's line towards the Ayub's regime, most of the party cadre opposed Ayub for being a dictator. Yes, the CP supported industrialization and other development works of General Ayub, but it did not support Ayub unconditionally. The Soviet bureaucracy was allied with the India and the Chinese bureaucracy made friends in the Pakistani state. Those two foreign states were at war with each other and tried to gain strategic foothold in Pakistan to advance their agendas. The Pakistani Communists paid a very high price for this deadly game that created a wedge in their ranks.

How did major left factions react to the formation of Pakistan People's Party? And was it correct for the Left to stay out of the PPP?

The pro-China faction (Bhashani) of West Pakistan took keen interest in the formation of Pakistan People's Party. Hanif Ramay, Mubashar Hassan and Meraj Khalid were in close collaboration with the party to facilitate the formation of PPP. The other factions of the party neither supported nor opposed the PPP, but followed the policy of working on issue-to-issue basis.

The Pakistan People's Party (PPP), formed in 1967, was able to capitalize on social radicalisation, winning the 1970 elections. It received the support of progressive parties and many trade union cadres, encouraged by the socialist rhetoric and the economic measures advocated by its leader Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was clever enough to woo the party cadre for winning the elections. Thus, when the PPP came to power in 1972, Communists were included in the government. Reforms, sometimes radical, were indeed implemented, but all that was short of expectations. Though broad-based Left accepted PPP, it lost confidence in Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who manipulated the Left for gaining power.

After separation of East Pakistan, Socialist Party was formed by the remnants of NAP-Bhashani in Pakistan? Is that true?

No, it is not true. It was not after separation that the Socialist Party was found. It was actually formed in March 1970 after a grand Kissan Conference was held in Toba Tek Singh which was attended by thousands of party workers. It was on this occasion that Bhashani announced that "now we cannot go together" and conceived the formation of the Socialist Party.

During the Bhutto's period, the CP remains underground. How do you view that policy? Also, the Socialist Party, it is said, wanted to join the anti-Bhutto alliance PNA. How would you assess the Left's stand towards the Bhutto government?

The period begins in 1972 when the Communist Party was not one entity as it was split in Sindh chapter and Lahore chapter. The party was legally banned at that time, but it kept functioning underground. Socialist Party was not the CP, rather it was a conglomerate of different people having

different ideologies. It is not correct to say that Socialist Party wanted to join the anti-Bhutto alliance. However, Wali Khan was part of the alliance called Pakistan National Alliance formed in 1977 to overthrow the rule of Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. The PNA manifesto was to end poverty, reverse inflation and bring back the 1970 prices. Implementation of Islam was also its election slogan. They promised to enforce the Shariah. They were a conglomerate of diverse views and of contradictory causes, such as Asghar Khan's secularism, Khan Abdul Wali Khan's Socialism and Maulana Maududi's hardline Islamism united by common dislike of Zulfikar Bhutto's autocratic policies. The alliance decided to contest the elections under one election symbol "plough" and a green flag with nine stars as its ensign.

The perception that we were against Bhutto is wrong. We were not against Bhutto, but were against some of his policies like dissolution of the Balochistan government, banning Wali Khan's party NAP, imposing governor's rule in NWFP. At the same time we supported Bhutto's land reforms that was a direct consequence of the struggle of Kissan Committee.

In the 1980s and the 1990s, Left splits and merges time and again. Can you briefly narrate the major splits and mergers during this period?

The 1986-87 split of Socialist Party was caused by arbitrary handling of the party affairs. There was no democracy in the party and workers felt disillusioned. Another big merger of Pakistan's Left parties surfaced in the form of Workers Party Pakistan. On March 21, 2010, National Workers Party Pakistan, Communist Mazdoor Kissan Party, People's Rights Movement, Watan Dost Mazdoor Federation and Awami Mazdoor Anjuman, along with a number of other progressive democratic groups, merged into a broad-based Workers Party Pakistan.

Before that in 1999, three progressive Leftist parties namely Pakistan National Party, Awami Jamhoori Party and Pakistan Socialist Party merged into a single political party called National Workers Party.

The Left contested elections in 1970 from Lahore. Also, earlier in 1950s Mirza Ibrahim was fielded as a candidate. That's what is often cited. But is there more to say about the Left's electoral activities? And why has the Left not been successful on electoral front?

Yes, Mirza Ibrahim contested the 1950 election while he was under detention. Though he secured more votes against his opponent Ahmed Saeed Kirmani of Muslim League and Kirmani conceded his defeat, the ultimate winner turned out to be Saeed Kirmani after the results were tampered with. Mirza was not an official candidate of the Communist Party, but the party supported him. It is also not correct to say that Left had not been successful on electoral front because National Awami Party of Wali Khan bagged majority seats in Balochistan and North West Frontier Province and turned out to be a successful party there with mass following.

How would you count successes and failures of the Pakistani Left?

We are still here doing our part of the job, and this means the Pakistani Left is successful and thriving. We will keep the mission going. Our failures are not as much as that of other major political parties. We will keep raising voice for the rights of workers and farmers and we will keep opposing feudalism. We are not failed people.

P.S.

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