

Pakistan: PMLN on the road to remove PPP govt

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PMLN very cleverly played Punjab card on the issue of load shedding. While promoting the widespread discontent on the issue, the PMLN has convinced most in Punjab that the PPP government is deliberately not releasing the same amount of electricity to Punjab compared to Sindh.

The Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PMLN) is on the road to an offensive strategy. Feeling the ground slipping even in Lahore, the PMLN has taken several steps that will bring them face to face with the PPP central government. They have another problem - Imran Khan, who is attracting sections of youth who would normally be apolitical.

In addition to organizing a massive rally in Lahore on 28 October, PMLN has adopted a massive programme of infrastructure development, particularly in Lahore.

How far will they be able to retain their political mass base in Punjab? Will they be able to topple the PPP central government? Can Imran Khan make a dent in traditional PMLN constituencies? What are the economic policies adopted in Punjab? Is there good governance in Punjab? We will look into some of these aspects in this article.

The leader of the opposition in the National Assembly, Choudry Nisar Ali, told reporters in Islamabad on 27th October that "all options are open for PMLN to topple the Zardari government". Most of the central leaders of PMLN and hawks like Saad Rafiq are openly talking of getting rid of the "Zaradari regime". "Go Zardari Go" is one of the slogans that were put on all the banners advertising the PMLN rally on 28 October. It seems that PMLN has changed their strategy from "working with" to "working without" the PPP.

This is not a sudden change in strategy. It is been created after months of consultation among the top PMLN leadership. They had to adopt the policy because of the extreme unpopularity of the PPP government. Perhaps no other civilian government has become as unpopular as the present PPP government. The adoption of the neo-liberal agenda forced the PPP government to borrow more and more and to cut state subsidies on an unprecedented level. Thus, prices of state provided services such as gas, electricity and oil have been hiked to a level never seen in the history of Pakistan.

The PMLN response to the economic crisis is to adopt a more liberal agenda. In a policy speech in September 2011, Mian Nawaz Sharif laid down PML priorities: "More privatization, getting rid of unprofitable state institutions, no subsidies to Railways, PIA and WAPDA, instead selling off assets of these institutions to make up the losses and so on". There is nothing new in these priorities. These are the policies adopted by Mian Nawaz Sharif in his two periods in power - 1990-1993 and 1997-1999. The results of these policies will be no different than those of the previous periods, "mass unemployment, throw away prices of state institutions, ever increasing gulf of wealth between rich and poor and more miseries for the working class".

Let's look at the policies adopted by the Punjab government under Mian Shahbaz Sharif.

The Punjab government subsidized scheme of 10 Rupees a kilo for wheat flour (Atta) had made Shahbaz Sharif, the chief minister, very "popular" in Punjab and Pakistan for a limited period. The Muslim League Nawaz (PMLN) was banking on this and other popular schemes introduced by their government in Punjab as their main strategy to end poverty.

This was repeated by the PPP government in a different form. They started distributing up to 1000 Rupees a month cash to the "poorest of the poor" under the name of the Benazir Income Support Scheme.

Throughout Punjab Atta (flour) was subsidized during the month of Ramadan in 2009. Another similar scheme was two Rupee Chapatti (bread) or Tandoor roti (oven bread). Commercial Tandoors were provided Atta at subsidized rates and sellers were asked to charge two Rupees for a Chapatti. The normal price was five Rupees.

Hundreds of thousands of people queued up to buy Roti and Atta at these bargain prices. But more than a dozen died while in the long queues, felled by heart attacks or beaten by police. Several dozen were injured and hundreds of thousands of hours were wasted standing in queues, with people waiting up to 12 hours.

What has been the result of this 5 billion rupee subsidy on Atta after two years? The scheme had to be abandoned during the devastating flood in 2010 despite Shahbaz Sharif's repeated insistence that he would continue it.

But these schemes have not even reduced poverty. They have been termed some of the most failed state sponsored schemes in Punjab.

What Shahbaz Sharif had done was nothing new. In fact he had borrowed this idea from his brothers in India. By implementing such schemes, some of the chief ministers in India became popular. They did not alleviate poverty there. According to one report, over 70% of all Indian people live on less than one dollar a day. An adult earning 11.80 Rupees a day in rural areas or Rs. 17.80 in urban areas lives below the poverty line.

Like India, Pakistan plans to reduce general food subsidies and has done so to a large extent, leaving subsidies in place only for the "poorest of the poor." This cuts down the numbers who receive subsidized food and ties them to politicians and their parties. The tactics of the chief minister of Punjab in Pakistan was therefore in line with the "new" neo-liberal agenda. It helped governments privatize the distribution of food while building in a populist dimension among the poorest layer of the population.

However, schemes like the Sasti Rooti and Benazir Income Support schemes conveniently teach people to forget universal needs for employment, housing, transportation health care and free education.

Another such scheme of Mian Shahbaz Sharif is Danish Schools, spending almost Rs. 16000 per month on every child enrolled in these in comparison to Rs. 200 to every child enrolled in ordinary government primary schools. Several of these schools have cost over Rs 3 billion. These are lodging and boarding schools for "bright" children of the poor families.

In Punjab alone, Rs 150 billion is required to cater to the missing facilities in all the 63,000 schools of the province. If the amount spent on Danish Schools were saved then at least 660 schools could be upgraded from primary to middle; 500 schools from middle to matriculation level. Currently 21

percent of children in schools do not have toilet facilities. The government has not spent even a single rupee on flood-affected schools, ignoring them completely.

The ideology behind the Shahbaz Sharif policy promotes dependence on rich politicians. The poor do not have to strive for justice, they should simply be grateful for the state's handouts. The poor just need to make sure that the government continues to provide subsidies.

Rich politicians like Mian Shahbaz Sharif will not take action against bosses who do not pay the minimum wage of Rupees 6000 a month to their industrial workers. He will not take action against those bosses who oppose the formation of trade unions and initiate violent measures against trade union leaders. There has not been a single case in Punjab where a trade union was formed during the period of Mian Shahbaz Sharif and trade union leaders were not subject to torture, imprisonment and losing their jobs.

The challenge by Imran Khan in Punjab will not go very far against PMLN; rather it will mainly damage the voting base of the PPP. Imran Khan's move in Punjab against Mian Nawaz Sharif instead of Zardari is seen by many as a bad strategy. He has become the darling of the media and spends most of his time talking to them. He is popular among the youth but his present strategy of bringing the "winning" candidates into Tehreek Insaaf could cause him a lot of damage. His neat and clean image has already come into question on this. He is using resources and money to bring his message to the masses just like the other capitalist feudal parties. If there is a competition of "who spends the most" to publicize their rallies, PMLN would be far ahead of Tehreek Insaaf in this field.

In Punjab, the policies of the PMLN leadership at least give an impression that they are doing something. Also, they are able to convey a message that they are being victimized in Punjab by the Centre. PMLN very cleverly played this Punjab card on the issue of load shedding. While promoting the widespread discontent on the issue, the PMLN has convinced most in Punjab that the PPP government is deliberately not releasing the same amount of electricity to Punjab compared to Sindh.

It seems that PMLN will be able to do considerable damage to the PPP central government with their present mass campaign. It may remind us to some extent of the days of the PNA reactionary movement of 1977, where all the right wing forces united against Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto. But the real difference is that in 1977, Bhutto faced an opposition against his reform agenda. Now, Zardari faces a growing opposition to his "government of non reform". The mass rallies will be more against corruption, bad governance and the total collapse of infrastructure.

The capitalist system, whether under Zardari or Mian Nawaz Sharif, Imran Khan or Munawar Hussan, only means misery for most of the population. The system is rotten to the core. It will not bring any meaningful change to the lives of the working class.

We need to rebuild the movement against the neo-liberal agenda in its newest version. We need to build a Socialist alternative to the deceptive policies of capitalist politicians. We oppose Mian Shahbaz Sharif's paternalistic policies and demand a future in which workers and farmers set the agenda.

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<http://www.viewpointonline.net/pmln-on-the-road-to-remove-ppp-govt.html>

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