

Pakistan: Towards a new left

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From the perspective of the Left, the most pressing task is to imagine a politics that is not confined within the repressive frameworks of our contemporary political scene.

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A little over two decades ago, the ideologues of neo-liberal capitalism were proudly declaring that the dialectic of History had ended with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the collapse of Communist governments in Eastern Europe. It was argued that capitalism had proven to be far more resilient than socialism and that we must locate emancipatory possibilities within the contours of market economies. The Social Democratic parties all across Europe, never known for swimming against the tide, fled the sinking ship and fully embraced this new vision of market fundamentalism. We were told that if poverty still exists, we should refrain from using outdated slogans such as 'revolution' and should look at 'non-political' alternatives in 'eradicating poverty,' such as working through Western-funded NGOs.

Thus, there existed only ONE narrative, all roads lead to the free market and any thought of constructing alternatives was futile. In Pakistan, this definitive victory of the free market was signaled by the PPP's unconditional embrace of the free market ideology in the late 1980s. Up until the mid-1980s, the PPP (never a genuine revolutionary party but one that had an important element of the left in its ranks) and other left-wing forces still attempted to posit the difference between the military rule and democratic rule as also one between authoritarian capitalism and a worker's friendly government. With the erasure of this divide, there emerged a complete consensus on some of the crucial rules of the game: a strong commitment to the free market hegemony, following the diktats of the IMF and World Bank, an unwillingness to challenge US hegemony, and a refusal to address the basic nature of the state. A host of ex-leftists abandoned 'utopian' ideas to join this emerging consensus and were heavily rewarded for this switch through lucrative NGOs, think tanks, government positions, and talk shows. Economics was reduced to the discourse of corruption and efficiency while democracy became limited to a mere repetition of an electoral procedure. With the End of History narrative becoming dominant, it did not take long for the "death of politics" to follow.

It is in this particular historical juncture in which I try to develop a framework in which the Pakistani Left can re-emerge as a powerful force in the country's political scene. Given the volatile world in which we live today, the End of History thesis seems at best embarrassingly naive and at worst, dishonest and cynical. In fact, we can argue that the tumultuous events (the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, Chile Student protests, etc.) around the world in 2011 signal, what the eminent French philosopher Alain Badiou calls, "The Re-Birth of History." What it in effect means is simple; the status quo is not only exploitative for a vast majority of people, but it is also unsustainable. It follows that people not only have the desire to bring a fundamental change in the way our world functions, but that they are also capable of realizing this dream.

Thus begins a new stage of confrontations, of heroic failures and glorious victories. The Left in Pakistan, and around the world, must quickly prepare itself for the coming challenges. To begin with, one will have to rethink all dominant paradigms that are used to understand politics in Pakistan.

Capitalism is still the key issue

The first and foremost task of the Left in Pakistan today is to re-insert the categories of Capital and class into our political discourse. It is indeed ironic that neo-liberal capitalism has been wreaking havoc on the marginalized sections of the world for the past 35 years, while it has also become the focus of sustained critiques by intellectuals and popular movements around the globe. Yet, despite the spectacular failure of the neo-liberal model in the form of the world financial crisis, the word 'neo-liberalism' has not even been introduced into our political discourse, nor has there been any serious discussion regarding its consequences. While this sorry state affairs reflects how the intelligentsia in this country has completely assimilated into the dominant narrative, it also demonstrates the weakness of the Left in formulating a coherent description of what ails Pakistan.

One brief examples will allow us to understand how far our discourse has moved toward the Right, and why and how we must challenge its hegemony. The dominant mode of understanding the economic crisis in Pakistan, and the consequent poverty, is through the discourse of corruption and efficiency. Such a narrative implies that Pakistan is inherently a rich country and it has been reduced to its current state due to the corruption of a handful of politicians (the corruption of generals is often missing from this narrative). The assumption is that if we were to have honest leaders, we could bring back the looted money, stop corruption, and end government patronage (by which they also mean the privatization of public corporations) in order to facilitate investment and 'development.' While this is a universal discourse under neo-liberalism, in Pakistan, such a discourse also fits neatly within the military establishment's desire for an authoritarian form of government in the country.

We must, however, also acknowledge that the politicians have fully participated in the normalization of the discourse of corruption by leveling corruption allegations against each other. The extent of the domination of this discourse can be ascertained from the fact that radical liberals try to use the same discourse to launch a critique of the military, i.e. that the military is involved in massive corruption. Such a 'radical' argument reifies the dominant narrative of understanding Pakistan's economy and at best implies that the military is more corrupt than politicians (a statement that admits that politicians are also corrupt). Such is the poverty of imagination in today's Pakistan!

To break this impasse, I propose that we must return to the Marxian understanding of the category of Capital. This is to argue that we must understand the imperatives of Capital to understand why certain policies are universally adopted by capitalist countries around the world. For example, the recomposition of capital under the neo-liberal regime was based on the financialization of global capital, including massive speculation, aggressive imposition of free markets, rolling back of the welfare state, and crushing the bargaining power of labor. Various struggles taking place around the world today point precisely towards the growing gap between the requirements of Capital and the basic needs of millions of people around the world. Such struggles are questioning the reduction of health and education budgets, the nature of industrialization, the conditionalities imposed by the International Financial Institutions (IFIs), and are demanding structural changes such as land reforms, the nationalization of banks and major corporations, etc. Such movements also help delineate the limits of Capital and are beginning to imagine a world beyond capitalism.

In Pakistan, apart from a few powerful social movements such as the Okara Tenants Movement, no serious attempt has been made by the Left to explain the crisis on its own terms. While theories of corruption or a 'Jewish conspiracy' are common, the Left's narrative is conspicuous by its absence. In addition, we must also raise the more obvious question: who will benefit from this 'development' that all our leaders desire? Can we still dare to suggest that there exists a working class in this country, that the whole neo-liberal project is premised on the super-exploitation of the labor of this particular class and ask why despite its centrality to the current system, the working class has vanished from all mainstream discourses on Pakistan?

Fighting Fear

What follows from this analysis is that the current dominant discourses on Pakistan are unable to fully grasp the historical juncture within which we find ourselves and, consequently, are unable to point toward an emancipatory alternative. If contemporary political discourse only helps to veil the underlying structures and contradictions of the system, then we should ask the classical Lacanian question "Where is the Real?"

Unfortunately, today in Pakistan we are presented with false choice of all sorts; the military vs. civilians, the Taliban vs. the U.S., the PPP vs. the PML, etc. Yet, we are unable to question the underlying consensus that exists in all of these apparent binaries. Let me once again invoke the French philosopher, Alain Badiou, in explaining how these dichotomies play on a subtle notion of fear that paralyzes our imagination, and how we must fight it.

Badiou argues that there are two types of fear that dictate contemporary politics- the primary fear and the secondary fear. The primary fear is etched in the political unconscious of the permanent state apparatus and relates to threats deemed existential by forces of the establishment. Such a fear produces a desire for a master who may suppress you further. This fear in Pakistan is linked closely to the deep state, i.e. the Pakistani military, the powerful intelligence agencies and their cronies. It has manifested itself at different points in our history as the fear of Communists, Indian agents, separatists, religious minorities, women and all other sections of society that were deemed a threat to the physical and ideological boundaries of the state.

On the other hand, the secondary fear operates as the 'fear of the fear', i.e. it merely reacts to the absurd fears propagated by the military establishment. Liberalism in Pakistan represents this political paranoia and it often leads liberals into bizarre alliances with sections of the US establishment, feudal lords and industrialists, as well as sections of the military establishment. Not only is such a fear farther removed from the lives of ordinary working people since it is merely a reaction to something that is false, it also forces these political forces to mimic the rhetoric of the establishment on key issues to enhance their credentials. The PPP is one example of such a reactive politics. While claiming to be fighting for democracy, it includes in its leadership those sections of society that continue to exercise systematic violence on ordinary people in this country (landlords, industrialists, bureaucrats, etc.). A complete consensus exists between the military establishment and the political parties on the general economic trajectory of the country, which is why ordinary people see the policies of the current government as a continuum from the Musharraf era. As we know from the brief history of the PPP (not to mention more overtly right-wing parties such as the PML-N and the PTI), it has continuously tried to posit a hawkish image to pacify the right-wing including cynical attempts at Islamization, military operations against Baloch activists, support to the Taliban in Afghanistan, or recent declarations by the Interior Minister that the Baloch liberation struggle is a foreign-funded conspiracy. It is difficult to criticize the establishment when our 'progressive' friends give us such little space!

From the perspective of the Left, the most pressing task is to imagine a politics that is not confined within the repressive frameworks of our contemporary political scene. Revolution, if anything, is a radical rupture in the state of affairs and its possibility cannot begin to emerge until we radically re-conceptualize our analysis and our praxis. As stated earlier, one must insist on bringing back the categories of class and capital into our analysis if we are to construct an alternative politics. Such a move cannot simply occur on the ideational level alone, it will have to be constructed in practice and will necessarily have to maintain a relative distance from 'National' and 'International' frameworks currently utilized to understand Pakistani society.

For example, a sustained peasant uprising in the Seraiki region can radically alter the terms of popular politics in the country. Not only will such a movement have to face the threats by the military-bureaucratic oligarchy, but will also expose PPP, PML-N, and PTI members from this region as clear opponents of revolutionary politics in this country. Such movements, with their ability to make old paradigms obsolete and opening up infinite possibilities for a new future, have the potential of becoming truly subversive. In order to move away from the politics of fear, the Left must devote its energies precisely towards building and consolidating such ruptures across the country.

Unity on new terms

Finally, I will discuss the absolute necessity of building a coherent and functional political organization of the Left. There are two reasons a political organization is an absolute necessity for any political change. First, in contrast to momentary explosions of anger and protests, a political organization instills a subjective factor so that anger can find a consistent expression. Second, it has the ability to bring together disparate struggles together under one umbrella in order to formulate a universal challenge to the system. Recent talks amongst some prominent Left parties underscores the need felt by cadres to form an organized and potent political organization that can meet the challenges currently faced by the country. Such moves need to be welcomed, but they can only succeed if we move away from certain old leftist paradigms, whose relevance is questionable today, and try to formulate new theoretical frameworks to understand the challenges we face today.

I will give two brief examples which require innovative approaches from the Left. Since the late 1960s, Marxist feminists have launched a sustained critiques of Left practices that undermine the centrality of the question of patriarchy. Old narratives of a technological fix for the woman question (with industrialization, women will become emancipated) or the promise of equality after the creation of a socialist paradise are inadequate and intellectually dishonest. Questions of female subjugation, as well as questions of caste, ethnicity, religion, etc., need to turn into an essential component of our organizational setup as well as the struggles in which we participate if we are to ever move near to our goal of universal freedom.

Similarly, the question of environmental degradation that continues to pose an existential challenge to the human race must be addressed by the Pakistani Left. This issue particularly re-enforces the philosophical basis of socialism, since it is a struggle that is forcing human beings to think of themselves as being part of the commons in contrast to the particularistic ethic of capitalism. Sensitivity towards such issues can reinforce the need for society that is based not on private profits but on the collective needs of human beings.

There is now a growing consensus regarding the absolute failure of the current state structure and the classes that rule it. Yet, we only see isolated and momentary bursts of anger across the country. The Left not only can, but must, play a decisive role in bringing together such voices and channeling them toward the construction of a different order. The ability to look beyond the discourses that veil

the struggles faced by ordinary citizens, to construct a discourse around popular politics and most importantly, to develop a political praxis based on such an understanding asks us to look beyond the temporal confines within which we find ourselves locked today. It is a path that demands exemplary patience and courage since, one not only invites the wrath of the state, but one is also subjected to the typical liberal retort of being 'utopian.' But it is precisely this "utopian" vision of a free and equal world that has moved millions of people across centuries, and fidelity to this vision, bolstered and reshaped by those who dare to challenge the status quo, will be our key weapon in the ensuing battles.

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P.S.

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