

Slow and necessary revival of the left in Pakistan

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The task of reviving the Left to once again become an effective player in the polity has been exercising minds in the surviving Left parties and groups for long but the achievement of this goal has proved difficult. It is therefore heartening to note the follow-up of the meeting of 10 Left parties and groups in Lahore on December 29, 2017 by the formation of a 17-parties/groups' platform dubbed Lahore Left Front (LLF).

Even a cursory perusal of the minimum programmatic pronouncements of these two meetings plus the composition of these brotherly platforms will be enough to prove that the LLF is inspired at least partially by the December 2017 moot. That 10-parties/groups platform agreed on what it considered the main or crucial tasks before it. These included the recovery of missing persons and their being charged through due process if there is any evidence of wrongdoing against them; deportation to their countries of origin of illegal immigrants; halting forced conversions and marriages of minority girls (particularly Hindu); regulation of the sugar mafia; restoration of tenancy rights in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's protected forest lands; withdrawal of unjust and false criminal cases against the Hashtnagar and Okara Military Farms' peasants, and the restoration of banned students unions.

The 10-party/groups' meeting characterised the current narrative dominating politics of corruption as the main if not only problem afflicting society as a phenomenon integral to the bourgeois (capitalist) system, the only solution/alternative to which is provided by socialism. The meeting also dilated on the persistence of feudalism and the need for land reforms. The participants vowed to wage a concerted struggle against fundamentalism, extremism, intolerance and fanaticism. In their struggle against feudalism they committed themselves to support the workers, farmers and tenants; work for the supremacy of parliament over the national security state; establish Pakistan as a multi-cultural country where every nationality would have full control over its resources; struggle for gender equality, the separation of the state and religion and the creation of a socialist economy in which there would be no class distinction in education and opportunity; implementation of the constitutional guarantees of shelter, employment, education, healthcare, and adherence to a non-aligned foreign policy while promoting friendly relations with all Pakistan's neighbours on the principle of non-interference.

The follow-up meeting of 17 parties/groups in Lahore on March 24, 2018 adopted a declaration focusing on four main issues to be tackled by the newly formed LLF: fight the growing tide of fundamentalism and terrorism; help develop class-based organisations of the working class; preserve democratic norms, and tackle the missing persons conundrum. While the 10-parties/groups session on December 29, 2017 set up an eight-member committee to take the process of a dialogue and coming together of the Left forward, the LLF has set up a 17-member organising committee to implement its programme. These two streams, national and local, will hopefully merge as the process plays itself out. The LLF has kept its doors open to non-Left forces desirous of being part of the endeavour to counter religious radicalism. It also critiqued the current dominant national narrative about corruption as certainly an issue but which fails to challenge the existing system

based on exploitation, inequality and injustice.

While the undeniable dearth in numbers on the Left means it has its work cut out for it, the apathy of the intelligentsia, including the progressive intelligentsia, underlines the deep psychological effects of the collapse of the Pakistani Left around 1980-81 and the decade later collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Since the latter event and the consequent end of the Cold War, the world (and in its wake Pakistan) has changed almost beyond recognition. In this brave new world of the internalisation of the inevitability of unfettered capitalism and so-called liberal (bourgeois) democracy, the Left worldwide struggles to re-establish a coherent and credible narrative based on a penetrating in depth analysis and critique of the workings of the system, how this has changed in the last three decades, and what are the effects on state and society of these developments.

In the case of Pakistan, such a narrative cannot escape our early or recent history, which by now has mired us in international isolation (read 'conflict' with the west), at odds with all our neighbours, and internally veering towards a new form of fascism allegedly backed by the ubiquitous establishment and representing a new chapter in the control and manipulation of the polity.

Perhaps the only reason (explicitly stated or implicitly internalised) for the Left to support the struggle for a genuine (bourgeois) democracy over the last 70 years, a struggle still in progress, is because they believed this provided the space for articulation of and struggle for their aims and objectives, central amongst them, and to which all other issues were linked but subordinate, being the establishment of a socialist state. How far in practice that hope has transpired is there for students of our history to peruse. Currently, such is the crisis of state and society and the consequent insecurity of the establishment despite no serious challenge to its hegemony that it now seeks (and to a considerable extent has silenced) the smothering through all possible means of the voices of dissent and criticism, whether in the mainstream or social media or in society at large.

The hoped for 'advantage' therefore of democratic liberties, including freedom of expression, remains an elusive will o' the wisp. That merely serves to underline the formidable challenges for the Left, ranging from evolving and being allowed to disseminate its message/narrative to confronting the risks to life and limb emanating from such activism. And of course this does not even compare to the greater risks to safety that is the inevitable outcome of practical organisation and struggle of the masses.

Is history on the side of socialism in the 21st century, as its advocates still are convinced of, or is the dream of a just world passé, as capitalist and pre-capitalist advocates would have us believe? Only time will tell, but it would not be out of place to insert a word of caution about premature triumphalism regarding capitalism's 'victory' and the lack of any alternative. History has a habit of surprising us when least expected.

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