

# Pakistan: The return of ideology

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**The past two weeks have witnessed the emergence of a debate in Pakistan long deemed dead by pundits across the political spectrum. The debate centres on the possibility (or impossibility) of an alternative to capitalism, a system whose logic has appeared 'natural' and beyond reproach for over three decades.**

These discussions have emerged with particular intensity after the Students Solidarity March, which brought thousands of young people onto the streets across the country. The debate in the aftermath of the protests has been both fascinating and painful to watch. For years, our university and administrative structures were designed to treat young adults as infants, a colonial hangover that treated local populations as 'not ready' for democracy.

The discussion becomes particularly bizarre when it comes from university administrators who feel that their students, if given any autonomy, will indulge in needless violence. Should not such lack of confidence in their students cause concern to universities on the quality of education being offered? Or better still, should universities not be held accountable for charging exorbitant tuition but providing an environment that in their own words is creating individuals with a propensity towards violence?

The force, determination and honesty of the youth activists, however, have compelled the federal government to acknowledge the necessity of students unions. Prime Minister Imran Khan tweeted in favour of student unions, while the Sindh cabinet has approved a bill for their restoration. It seems that student representation has become a point of convergence as a result of the immense mobilization of students in the midst of threats, insults and obstacles created by government and university administrators.

Like any authentic campaign, the Students Solidarity March has shifted the boundaries of acceptable demands. Student unions are no longer taboo, but new red lines have been drawn. The colour 'red' has emerged as the symbol of what this new consciousness represents, with supporters identifying it with the history of resistance, while detractors call it a failed symbolism from a bygone era.

The response of the government is typical of an administration that wants to contain the potential of a growing movement. The methodology is simple and has been in use since colonial times. Accept the immediate demands of the movement but ensure that they are not connected to any subversive ideas, with the government monopolizing the definition of 'subversive'. In other words, the ideas that can give consistency and durability to the movement are to be separated from the movement itself, turning the upsurge into a technical matter to be dealt between unthinking students and benevolent administrators.

Such insistence on wiping out ideas has a longer genealogy in the Subcontinent. In my doctoral work, I uncovered how colonial officials were not particularly afraid of riots or protests that erupted spontaneously. Instead, what unnerved them was the site of intellectually inclined individuals who were not demonstrating signs of uncontrollable rage but were allied to a rigorously crafted idea. In

other words, their power stemmed from the fact that they were ideological beings – and hence were tied to a specific political project.

For the last forty years, the world has been defined by the words of former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher proclaiming that “There is no alternative” to capitalism. The philosophical equivalent of this audacious statement was presented by Francis Fukuyama, who claimed that History itself had ended with the spectacular victory of capitalism over all its rivals, including socialism as embodied by the former Soviet Union.

Living in these ‘End Times’ meant that all ideologies were considered relics of the past, with capitalism being equated with human nature itself. The trick played by those in power was to erase the violent dislocations created by capitalism in the natural and social worlds, as well as the intense intellectual debates on the viability of the system. In this ‘post-ideological world, even the disastrous policies pushed by bureaucrats of the IMF and World Bank over the past 40 years were elevated to the status of eternal truth, with the dreaded gulags being presented as the only alternative to market fundamentalism.

In the name of post and anti-ideology, we have experienced the worst forms of ideological manipulation. The growing inequality around the globe, unbearable forms of Third World debt and the looming climate catastrophe are viewed as technical problems to be managed by experts, erasing the political choices that produced these crises. Anyone who insists that we change course is immediately viewed as a law and order problem, deepening the link between inequality and securitization.

This is why there is panic in powerful quarters about left-leaning slogans used by students across Pakistan. Many sitting ministers can be seen giving lectures to the youth, praising their campaigns but warning them not to fall for a “failed” system. Such paternalistic advice refuses to recognize that the anger seen on the roads is a response to the failures of the existing system, rather than an attachment to some past utopia.

The sedition charges filed against many of us betrays the anxiety over the revival of an idea that continues to haunt each administration’s unconscious despite its supposed death. The ideas of equality, socialism and unions were displaced from the modern world. The fact that they have burst out on the streets of Chile, New York, Baghdad, and now Pakistan, inspiring burgeoning movements in the process, cannot but appear as a violent upsurge for the managers of a world that had pronounced such ideas dead.

The emergence of ideological splits today is a result of the divisions that exist in actual societies, with eight families controlling half of the world’s resources. As Professor Wendy Brown has shown, the fall of the Berlin Wall was followed by the proliferation of walls – walls that separate immigrants from citizens, militarized zones from ‘normal’ spaces, and poor neighbourhoods from rich suburbs. This spatial division is also reproduced in the realm of ideology where a concerted effort is made to ensure that the ‘dangerous ideas’ do not seep into mainstream discourse. Much of our public discourse is now reduced to controlling the limits of our thoughts, ensuring we do not stray beyond borders defined by those in power.

Yet, in this age of global anger, it is no longer viable to repress mass resistance, nor is it possible to prevent the re-emergence of ideas historically associated with dissent. Throughout modernity, socialism has named an alternative possibility in contrast to the social, economic and ecological disparities generated by capitalism. It is understandable why the name would be invoked when the crises of the dominant system deepens, and when those protesting seek new horizons for establishing a more just social order. It does not entail a mimicking of past experiences.

Instead, the task ahead is to reimagine the idea of socialism to make it adequate to the historical circumstances that the world finds itself in. Such creativity is necessary to give form to the anger seen among the youth in Pakistan and around the world, and to build an alternative that can provide orientation to these momentary bursts.

A sign of changing times is that Fukuyama himself, who announced the death of ideology, has recently called for the return of socialism. The time when it was easier to imagine the end of the world rather than of capitalism is now definitively over. The debate about big ideas is back, and we must engage with them and choose sides.

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**Ammar Ali Jan** is an historian and a member of the Haqooq-e-Khalq Movement.

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