

From nowhere to everywhere

# On the foot steps of advocates, till the end of dictatorship: the mass movement in Pakistan

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On 8<sup>th</sup> March 2007, no-one in Pakistan would have thought of a mass movement erupting in the near future with the potential to overthrow General Musharraf's regime. A day later on 9<sup>th</sup> March, he suspended the chief justice of the Supreme Court of Pakistan. He had the illusion that nothing would happen and business as usual would go on. He had done it in the past successfully.

But it was different this time. Immediately after the suspension, the 80,000 strong advocates' community started agitation against the decision.

The peak of this agitation was on 14<sup>th</sup> May 2007. For the first time since General Musharraf took over the power in October 1999, whole of Pakistan shut down. It was the first political strike in seven years. It was also the first political action that was not initiated by the religious fundamentalist forces.

On 14 May, Pakistan was united against military dictatorship and gangsters of MQM, (United National Movement) a linguistic party sharing power along with General Musharraf. From Karachi to Peshawar, all the shops were closed and there was very thin traffic on the streets. In Lahore, the largest ever demonstration since 9<sup>th</sup> March took place from Lahore High Court to Governor House on the main Mall Road. Over 15,000 participated.

The strike was a solid one and even traders associated with the military regime went on strike. A great anger was expressed against the killing of over 40 political activists who went to the reception of chief justice Iftikhar Mohammed Choudry on 12 May in Karachi. Over 200 were injured by the direct fire from the thugs of MQM, who had announced that they would not tolerate the reception in Karachi.

"Karachi is ours and we would not like the political parties to politicize the issue of chief justice" declared Farooq Sattar, the parliamentary head of MQM a day earlier. Karachi is in the control of this neofascist organization that bases itself on the immigrants of 1947 who speak Urdu. They control the local bodies and almost all the provincial and national seats from the largest city of Pakistan.

The 12 May saw some of the worst incidents of direct killings of innocent citizens and political activists from different opposition parties in Karachi. All the roads linked to Shahrai Faisal, the main road to airport were blocked by massive containers and trucks. The purpose was to stop people coming to the main road.

Although there was hundreds of Labour Party Pakistan activists present in different routes to the airport, fortunately none of them were injured or killed. They were bringing the injured ones to hospitals. Several busloads of LPP activists were snatched by the gangsters of MQM who dragged the activists inside with their guns at their heads.

"I am at Awami Markaz hiding behind a pillar of the bridge. Firing is going on from different sides. Next to me are lying five people, covered with blood. They have been hit by bullets. There is no ambulance to take them to hospital. I am crying all the time. I can not help the injured one, and I may be hit as well" Azra Perveen, a Labour Party Pakistan activist told me on telephone on 12<sup>th</sup> May at 2pm. We tried to send the media and some ambulances, but no-one was ready to go that place. It was only after two hours that the injured were rushed to hospital.

Sadly, three of them died later. Azra has been in a state of shock for the last three days. She has seen the blood everywhere.

A private TV channel, Aaj, tried to show live the firing by the gangsters. So the semi-fascist groups when there and fired at the TV channel building for over six hours.

The local police and rangers had given a free hand to "deal" with the opposition. The chief justice was blocked at the Karachi airport alongside with 25 advocates. They were held for nine hours at the airport. The state authorities wanted him to go by helicopter to Sind High Court building to address the Sind High Court Bar Association. This was to avoid the reception of the people outside on the main roads. He refused to go by helicopter.

While they stopped the chief justice at the airport, the private army of the MQM opened fire on all those who came in processions to receive and welcome him. Thus a firing drama lasted for over 14 hours, resulting in the deaths of over 40 by midnight.

After the incidents of 12<sup>th</sup> May, the MQM is neither united nor national. They are many resigning from MQM in Punjab, and Karachi is not united anymore for MQM after nearly two decades.

The same night on 12<sup>th</sup> May, the conservative Muslim League Q had planned a "mass" rally in Islamabad in support of the sacking of chief justice. The Muslim League is in power with General Musharraf. This was a rally planned weeks earlier to counter the growing sympathy for the chief justice and a growing demand for an end of the military regime.

All state employees were asked to attend the rally. All sanitary workers were forced to attend. The Muslim League had promised to give two to five hundred Rupees (\$3.50 to \$8.50) to everyone who attended this "historic" rally, along with free mineral water and food. They have been regular complaints printed for the last two days in the national media about ignoring promises of such a kind. Despite all the efforts, not more than 20,000 were in the rally. It was not a rally but a festival opportunity for many to see Islamabad.

Addressing this rally General Musharraf praised the MQM by saying that the people of Karachi has come out today. Yes, they came out to be hit by bullets of the supporters of General Musharraf.

It all went against the regime. Their rally in Islamabad was a failure. Their strategy to stop the reception of chief justice resulted in bloodshed. They lost their support among the middle class, the traditional support for the military regime and MQM. The representatives of over 480 markets of Lahore announced, and acted upon, the call for a shut-down strike on 12<sup>th</sup> May. It was mainly announced by former supporters of the Musharraf regime.

The movement of the advocates had been started by the bar associations across Pakistan after 9<sup>th</sup> March 2007. The advocates historically have been in the forefront of every democratic struggle in Pakistan. They were the main force behind the movement against General Ayyub Khan's dictatorship in the sixties: they were also responsible for keeping the movement alive during General Zia's dictatorship in the eighties. Some of them have been cooperating with the military regime of general

Musharaff. Some of them had illusions of the nature of the regime. They thought it might be a progressive military regime. But all that is gone with the wind.

The movement has developed from nowhere to everywhere. It is everywhere. People are talking about it. They are very angry about the bloodshed. They have all seen it on the TV by the live coverage of competing private TV channels. Mostly they have mobile phones that have helped them to get immediate information.

There have been numerous hunger strike camps, protest camps, and small and big demonstrations mainly by the advocates during the first sixty days of the movement. The movement was built up slowly but steadily. The consistency in the protests by the advocates convinced many ordinary Pakistanis to give attention to the movement.

The movement to end the military regime in Pakistan is facing its second phase of repression. The first phase of repression was to suppress the advocates in the first week of the movement just after 9<sup>th</sup> March. Many advocates were beaten up by police and many were arrested. That did not work.

Then regime strategy was to exhaust the movement by opening up. They allowed the demonstrations to take place freely. That brought more people in the movement including the activists of political parties mainly Muslim League (Nawaz), Peoples Party, parties associated with Awami jamhoori Tehreek, the left alliance including Labour Party Pakistan, Awami National Party, National Party, Baluchistan National Party, MMA, the religious alliance and so on.

The second phase of repression has started from 4<sup>th</sup> May. This time it is mainly against the political activists. I was also detained for three days by Lahore police from 4<sup>th</sup> May to 7<sup>th</sup> May. This was to prevent political activists arranging the reception of chief justice while he was due in Lahore on 5<sup>th</sup> May to address the Lahore High Court Bar Association. He reached Lahore from Islamabad in 25 hours instead of normal five hours. This was due to the massive turnout on the main GT road to welcome the chief justice.

Labour Party Pakistan saw the potential of the movement just after 9<sup>th</sup> March. It became part of the movement from the very beginning. Its poster "on the footsteps of the advocates till the end of dictatorship" was the hit poster among the advocates. It has printed leaflets in thousands to distribute among the communities appealing to them to join the movement. It has organized public meetings and rallies to make people part of the movement.

Who is this chief justice of Supreme Court of Pakistan who has initiated the movement? The chief justice Iftikhar Choudry was no exception to the other judges who helped to sustain this regime. But in his two years of office, he took many 'sue motto' notices regarding ordinary Pakistanis who were subject to human rights violations. He particularly helped women victims of rape, and conservative reactionary customary practices, that make women half of man.

He also took notices of the irregularities of the privatization process of Pakistan Steel Mills in Karachi. He in fact stopped the privatization of this massive industrial unit of Pakistan. On the other hand, he has also given decisions against trade union rights and so on and he has banned some strikes of the public sector.

So he was not a hero worthy of the ordinary people of Pakistan, but someone who helps sometimes. He earned respect when he refused to resign on 9<sup>th</sup> March, when he was called to the Army House by General Musharraf in the presence of five military generals. The military generals immediately removed him from the post and put him under house arrest. This resulted in an absolute anger among the advocates who termed this act as an attack on the judiciary.

The movement is gaining momentum among the masses day by day. This is because of the implementation of neoliberal agenda at a faster speed. The privatization, the deregulation, the so-called free market policies meant an upsurge of prices of every day things at a level never seen before. People were fed up of the regime but had no trust in the main political parties. So they were angry, but not part of the movement.

The religious fundamentalist MMA, who had street power, used this to gain more and more concessions from the regime including power in North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and power sharing in another province, Baluchistan. But they had come out to save the regime whenever it was in trouble.

Now the religious fundamentalists are trailing behind the advocate's movement, in the hope of hijacking the movement. They have lent their support to the advocates but they are not trustworthy. They can go along with the military regime any time.

Neither is the Pakistan People Party trustworthy. Benazir Bhutto admitted last month that it is in contact with the military regime and is ready to share power with General Musharraf as president. This sparked a great anger among the advocates who are mainly led by supporters of PPP. But the deal with the PPP melts away in the heat of the movement. Benazir does not say anymore that she is willing to share power with General Musharraf.

The movement of the advocates is mainly led by a young generation. It is their first experience and they are up to the mark. They do not act upon the advice of their seniors to go slow. That is the strength of the movement.

How and when Mushraf will step down, who will take over, will it be another general to hold general elections or a transitional government of some alliances, these are some of the question discussed in the movement. One thing is absolute sure that Musharraf is weaker to an extent never seen before. He can not last long as he had planned. Many have started counting the days. He is a General on his last leg.

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