

The 15 Jail Days under Musharaf military dictatorship

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It was one of worst jail experience I had during my 30 year of political activism. I was released after 15 days when my three months detention orders were withdrawn by the home secretary of Punjab Government on 19th June 2007. It was not due to mercy granted by the Punjab government but our local and international massive solidarity campaign forced them to do so. Hundreds of protest letters by political, social and trade unions organizations were sent to General Musharaf with dozens of faxes and messages of protest to different provincial authorities during the solidarity campaign against my detention.

Most importantly, a petition at Lahore High Court was to be heard on 20th June. One of the most prominent advocate and former president of Supreme Court Bar Association of Pakistan, comrade Abid Hassan Minto was to argue my case against the detention. Abid Hassan Minto is also head of National Workers Party and convener Awami Jamhoori Tehreek AJT (Peoples Democratic Movement) a Left alliance of seven political parties. Labour Party Pakistan is part of AJT.

Police came to my house on 4th June at 4am to pick me up. While at police station Harbancepura, I repeatedly asked if there is any detention order against me. There was no reply by local police officer. He kept telling me that you will be free this evening and that at the most in three days. That lie was told to over 600 political prisoners who were rounded up from there houses, the same way and same time. It was beginning of a new wave of repression against political activists who were active in the movement of advocates to overthrow the military regime of General Musharaf.

The movement started on 9th March 2007 when General Musharaf tried unsuccessfully to force the chief justice of Supreme Court of Pakistan Mr. Iftikhar Choudry to resign. This “no” of chief justice triggered a mass movement of the 80,000 strong advocate’s community for the independence of judiciary. Political parties joined the movement and there has been regular demonstrations and public rallies since then for the overthrow of military regime of General Musharaf. To stop the participation of the political activists, the military regime decided to round up over 600 political activists from different parts of Punjab.

Labour Party Pakistan was part of the movement from the day one of the advocate’s mobilization. I was arrested for three days on May 3rd 2007 for three days and police released me afterwards despite they had my one month detention order. This was my second arrest within a month.

Our advocates that included Syed Mohammed Shah, president District Courts Bar Association, Raja Saleemullah and Ijaz Hussain went to Lahore Session Judge that morning and filed a petition for my recovery from illegal detention. Unfortunately, the Session Judge did not issue orders for a bailiff to recover me but issues notices to police for next morning. This was the turning point for the change of police behavior towards me.

Till the time of receiving a court notice, the police officers were polite and I was even allowed to keep my mobile and receive visits of my comrades and friends at the police station. My ordeal has started. I was immediately removed from the Harbancepura police station and then after nearly two

hours in a moving police van, I was finally de-loaded at Bagbanpura police station in Lahore.

After spending the night at this police station, the police asked me to sit in a police van which drove me to a private place. This was the time when police had to tell the Session Judge that Farooq Tariq is not arrested and is not with them. I was in fact not with them in formal terms. I was like a kidnapped person, not by private gangs, but state gangsters. The place where I was kept belonged to an elected counselor of ruling party Muslim League. It was a store of plastic factory where I had to be for the next 24 hours in the strict vigilance of two armed men in plain cloths from local police.

I protested again and again for being kept in a private place instead of a police station. But the two armed men told me that it is an order by my high ups and they have to obey it. The two police officers who came to collect me late at night told me that our senior police officers are very angry with you because of your petition in the court.

I was brought back to the same police station and then put behind bars with over 13 persons charged for different criminal activities.

It has been practice of Punjab police that they pick up the political activists from their houses early in the morning and keep them in the police station for two three days. This is normally done when there a public rally organized in the town. Instead of stopping the rally in day time, the tactic of police is to round up the active workers in the early hours of the day. So they should not play their role in organizing the event. This is to tell the world, yes they have freedom to organize the public meetings but not many are coming to the rallies. So the activists are normally released within two three days. This is all illegal practice.

Unfortunately, this practice of the police was not challenged by the major political parties. The workers do not go to court because it is lengthy procedure. So to be rounded up and be in police custody and not challenging the police against this action was a normal practice.

I refused to accept this sort of illegal behavior of police. When I was arrested on 3rd of May 2007 and released after three days, I went to the court and a case against police officers was registered. The court has directed the police station officer to register a case against the top police officers. I was in the process of getting this case registered, when I was picked up again.

On June 6th, I was again removed from the police station and sent to another private place near Harbancepura Police Station. By then, the police had got my detention order from the home department of Punjab for three months and had to tell Sheikh Rauf the District Session Judge that morning that Farooq has already been sent to Bahawalpur jail.

Bahawalpur city is nearly 450 kilometer from Lahore. The jail is famous for its cruelties and strictness. Most of the prominent political prisoners have been kept in this jail during the past many years.

The police van had another political prisoner from Pakistan Peoples Party when we left at 12 noon to Bahawalpur in the company of seven police men. The temperature was over 47 degree and the driver was over speeding the van. It was one of the worst travels I had during my life. A heat wave with bumpy over speeding van was an experience that I can not take off my mind.

We arrived at 7pm and immediately were sent to Block A of Bahawalpur Jail.

There were four more political prisoners from Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PMLN) who were there for three weeks already. Noshad Hameed, an activist of PMLN immediately shouted "Labour Party has arrived". We both had shared the same jail barrack at Lahore Kot Lakhpat jail in 2001.

We the two political prisoners from Lahore were put in separate cells. I asked the jail authorities to allow us to share one cell. "Two are not allowed to share one cell; they might be involved in homosexual activities" I was told by one jail warden. "It has to be three, more than three or single person in one cell" he told me.

Bahawalpur is one of most hot area of Pakistan. We had to experience that for next seven days. I was alone in the cell that was more like a cage. There was a small room, a small veranda and something you can call a bath room. One woolen blanket was thrown inside the cell. That was to put on the floor to sleep, nothing else.

We were not allowed to bring any paper or pen. I had three pair of my Shalwar Qameez, the traditional dress in Pakistan for summer. No towel or tooth paste and brush was with me. I was like a lion in a cage moving from one corner to another all the time, then sitting in one place, eating what the jail has to offer, something like food. It just remembered me of Lahore zoo where I normally go with my 6 year old son Abdullah to see the lions.

Next day in the evening, 22 more political prisoners arrived from Lahore to share these four cells in Bloc A. I was absolute pleased to see more people. Seven of them, all from Pakistan Peoples Party were pushed in my cell. This ended my solitary confinement, much to my pleasure. At least there were some to talk to.

We were sent to Bahawalpur from Lahore as a punishment. This was to isolate us from our friends, families and community. This was to teach us a lesson for our opposition to a military dictatorship.

The Musharaf regime was acting like his British colonial masters who used to send the political prisoners to Andaman Islands while they ruled the Indian sub continent for over 200 years. The Island was known in common terminology as Kaala Paani (black waters). Many freedom fighters that were sent there never came back to their homes, most of them died while serving the life long prison terms.

This was to break our will to fight the military regime. This was to tell us that we are in a prison and a prison in Pakistan under military regime. When ever we asked the jail wardens, please take us out of our cages to have a little walk inside the Bloc, they told us, it is a prison and not a garden. The jail authorities treated us like animals.

The heat wave went up to 52. The electricity always went off, some time 14 hours a day. The floor of the cell was heated all the time. Even the water will be off while the electricity went off. We had one fan and the air of the fan came down to the floor after hours. It was only after three days of protest that our defected fan was changed with a better one and one more fan was installed in the veranda. We paid from our pockets for the fan. It was PPP leaders who had some amount deposited with the jail authorities while they arrived. There was no newspaper allowed inside. So we were totally blank from the outside world. A jail warden advised us to take of our shirts to compete the heat wave. Most of us remained without shirts during the next seven days. Our bodies were always wet because of perspiration.

We had to go on hunger strike after four days in the cell. This was to demand water. One morning, there was absolute no water coming in. Earlier, there was very little water coming in from the pipe but we could fill a little plastic bottle in half an hour. The protest paid off. The jail management had to change the pipes and replace the age old motor. The water problem was at least solved. The only remedy to save the body from heat was to put some water on the body all the times.

On the sixth day, my two elder brothers Ahmad Yaseen and Ahmed Saeed were able to visit me at

Bahawalpur jail. They got the permission to visit me from home department in Lahore. They brought fruit, soft drinks and some cloths, tooth paste and brush etc. they also deposited some amount in my jail account, so I could order some basics from the jail shop. It was my first contact from the outside world. My brothers told me that I was going to be shifted to Lahore Kot Lakhpat Jail tomorrow. They had heard the news from the home department.

Comrades from LPP in Lodhran, a city 20 kilometer from Bahawalpur, had tried their best to contact me; they were able to send some fruit and sweets inside the cell the next morning. The comrades were close friends of an assistant jail superintendent of Bahawalpur jail, but he was unable to help me. He came several times to visit me and asked me what can I do for you, I always asked him to bring me some blank papers to write down something, but he was not able to do that. Next morning when he arrived, I asked him if he can arrange my travel to Lahore at night time instead day time if I am shifted to Lahore jail. That is what he was able to do and I left to Lahore next evening in a police van at 11pm. This was to avoid the heat of the day time.

Police at the jail gate was waiting for me to take me to Lahore. They tried to hand cuff me. I refused to do that. It took one hour before they were able to do that because of my resistance. I told them I am not a criminal; I am not going to be treated like criminals. I am not running away from here in the presence of dozens of policemen.

After whole night travel in a small police van, we arrived in the morning at Kot Lakhpat jail in Lahore. Here, I was put together with other political prisoners who were brought in from other districts to Lahore. I shared a very small cell, smaller than Bahawalpur jail with eight others political prisoners. But the difference was that the outside door was open and we could stroll in the lawn of the Qasuri Chakki number 3 within the compound.

Here at Kot Lakhpat jail, a 52 year old political activist Sarmad Mansoor from Pakistan Peoples Party had died a day earlier in the jail dispensary after he was denied proper medical facilities. It was a murder by the government of Punjab with the help of jail authorities. He was arrested from a hospital in Gujarat district and was admitted to a jail dispensary with no adequate health facilities. He died of a heart attack in this dispensary on 14th June. When I arrived on 15th June morning, all the 32 political prisoners from different political parties were on hunger strike, so I joined in as well.

Here, the next five days till my release on 19th June was ok. We had to sleep inside the very tiny cell but from morning till evening, we were allowed to move around. But no one from outside was allowed to visit me. Although, on 16th June, several comrades waited outside the jail for several hours with a permission of the home department of Punjab government to visit me, but they were not allowed to visit me.

After the death of one political prisoner which became a national issue, the attitude of the government changed towards political prisoners. Our national international solidarity campaign was picking up. There demonstrations in 6 different cities for my and other political prisoners during these days. In Lahore, over 400 turned up to demand my release. The Karachi LPP organized two demonstrations and a vigil at night to demand my release. Over 300 important international personalities had signed a petition for mine release. The government felt the pressure and started releasing the political prisoners. I was the last political prisoner to be released on 19th June. While I was coming towards the jail gate, I had to collect the amount, I had deposited at the jails accountant on arrival.

While I was standing there, I was approached by one political prisoner. He was shouting already that I want to see Farooq of Labour Party Pakistan. When I heard this, I told him, it is me, he could not recognize me immediately but then he hugged me several times. He was Iqbal from India. An Indian

prisoner, whom I had met in 2001 in the same jail. The Indian prisoners were housed next to our barrack and we used to send food for them. At the time in 2001, on his request, I was able to send a Human Rights Commission Pakistan delegation to jail afterward. The HRCP delegation was able to help the release of several Indian prisoners who had completed there sentences but waiting for an exchange of prisoners between the two countries.

Iqbal has heard that I am in jail again and he also knew that I could be released today, somehow, he was able to come out of his barrack to greet me in the lobby. We spoke for some minutes; he wanted me to do the same. "Get some Indian prisoners out of jail" he asked me. I promised to do what I could do. I also gave him some five hundred Rupees to buy some fruit for the Indian prisoners. This was touching time for me. I was remembered even after six years by the Indian prisoners. Good work is not forgotten for long times. Iqbal has been here for all those six years. One day he will be also with his family in India.

Out side the jail, several dozens LPP and social organizations activists were waiting to welcome me. They had heard only few hours earlier that I be released today. "Go Musharaf Go" was the chant that might even be heard by people inside the jail. The red flags of LPP were waving and slogans to continue the struggle against military dictatorship were raised. Many more were waiting at Shimla Pehari Chouck near LPP office. I was brought to LPP office in a procession. At 5pm, I addressed a press conference at Lahore Press Club. So, straight from jail to the thick of political activities once again. The struggle has to continue till the emancipation of human kind from all sorts of prejudices and dictatorial regimes.

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