

An interview

A Left Voice in Pakistan

Friday 9 November 2007, by [Against the Current](#), [TARIQ Farooq](#) (Date first published: 1 November 2007).

FOLLOWING THE OCTOBER 18 attack on the massive procession into Karachi welcoming Benazir Bhutto back from an eight-year exile, Farooq Tariq, General Secretary of the Labour Party Pakistan, expressed his solidarity with the families of the more than 135 killed and 540 injured. The day afterward, at a crowded press conference in Lahore, he pointed out:

“On the eve of Benazir Bhutto’s return, this suicidal attack is a warning note to all the democratic forces in Pakistan. It is an attack on civil liberties and the right of association and assembly. This attack is to terrify people struggling to get rid themselves from militarism and religious fundamentalism. Such attacks are the result of a calculated game of eliminating opponents. It is a fascist tactic and we condemn the action in the strongest terms.”

He encouraged the press to focus on the political context for the attack, one of the deadliest in Pakistan’s history. For Pakistanis the U.S. occupation of Iraq and of the U.S.-NATO military intervention in Afghanistan is a threat to their national autonomy. Over the past three months the Pakistani army’s operation in the tribal areas, involving 90,000 soldiers, has resulted in hundreds of civilians dead, and more than 1,000 soldiers killed. Viewed as Washington’s proxy war, this offensive has proved costly for Musharraf.

Farooq seeks the launching of suicidal attacks as “a miscalculation of the religious fundamentalists who believe that it is the only way to teach the imperialist a lesson. Imperialist forces and their agents in Pakistan will not be silenced by these suicidal attacks. On the contrary, ordinary citizens of Pakistan will be met by more repressive laws and restrictions to their civil liberties. The religious fundamentalists are providing an excuse for a ban on public rallies.”

Critical of Benazir Bhutto’s willingness to cooperate with General Pervez Musharraf, Tariq pointed out that Bhutto seems willing to surpass Musharraf in “toeing the policies of American imperialism in the region.” Yet noting that the crowd who came out to welcome her was overwhelmingly working class, the LPP general secretary identified with their aspirations for ending the military regime and for radical change:

“We must fight against religious fundamentalism and militarization. They both are enemies of the working class; both are against women rights, minority rights and human rights in general. Both are against the right to assembly and right of free expression.”

Winning Democracy Through Deals?

Months of negotiations between General Musharraf and Benazir Bhutto, leader of the Pakistan Peoples Party, were hothoused by Washington, which supports Musharraf as a key ally. Washington encouraged the cementing of the alliance as necessary to stabilize a volatile situation. In the end, Musharraf arranged an amnesty bill that allowed Bhutto to return to home. Under its terms, she will not have to face charges that she and her husband embezzled government funds and placed them in a Swiss bank account. Further, she will be allowed to run for a third term as prime minister. (Meanwhile a Swiss judge examining one of the money-laundering charges will be presenting the finding to a prosecutor.)

Given that Musharraf is now viewed by many Pakistanis as a U.S.-backed puppet, Bhutto's willingness to maneuver with him has cost her much of the PPP's secular and educated middle-class base. For her part, she justified the power-sharing arrangement as a peaceful way to end military rule and reestablish democracy. Having concluded the deal, she is focused on shoring up a working-class base for the parliamentary elections. (The crowd at the welcome home procession was close to half a million. According to one report, the busing in of PPP members cost over three billion rupees.)

Although Musharraf "won" the October presidential election, since he is also chief of the army the Supreme Court still has to rule on whether he was eligible. The Court must also rule on the legality of Benazir Bhutto's amnesty. A negative decision would open the way for the previous embezzlement charges to be reinstated.

At the same time, when Nawaz Sharif — leader of the Pakistan Muslim League, and who like Benazir Bhutto has twice been prime minister — flew home September 10, he received different treatment. Held for several hours and then forcibly returned to Saudi Arabia. Sharif has seen his popularity rise as Bhutto's has declined precisely because Sharif has remained Musharraf's opponent. Will the feelings of sympathy over the suicide bombings be a force that Benazir Bhutto can mobilize in her quest for victory in the elections?

Farooq Tariq proposed an entirely different outcome:

"General Musharraf's regime should take full responsibility for this incident and resign immediately. We demand an interim government based on trade unions, social organizations and political parties to hold an immediate general elections. Let the people of Pakistan decide who will be their representatives. The military solutions have failed miserably. They have endangered the lives of millions and people."

Prior to these latest explosive events, Against the Current conducted the following interview with Farooq Tariq by email. We publish it here to help provide background on the unfolding crisis as well as presenting the perspectives of an important secular, democratic working-class formation in Pakistan.

—The ATC Editors

ATC: Why did Musharraf attempt to remove the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court last March?

Farooq Tariq: On 9th March Iftikhar Mohammed Chaudhry, Chief Justice of Supreme Court of Pakistan, was suspended by General Musharraf on nepotism and corruption charges. These allegations were not accepted by the 80,000 lawyers who have very strong democratic traditions and are very well organized in their bar councils and bar association.

The Chief Justice's real crime was what is known as "judicial activism" in favor of ordinary citizens. Chaudhry has stopped the privatization of Pakistan Steel Mills Karachi, the country's largest industrial unit with over 15,000 workers. It was sold to a group close to prime minister at a price so very low it surprised everyone.

The Chief Justice also took strong actions in favor of women who were being discriminated against

due to conservative traditions. He took notice of bonded labor in the brick kiln and agriculture industries. He also put a stop to some commercial activities that could have resulted in an environmental catastrophe despite the fact that these businesses were owned by military generals.

ATC: Why was there a massive response to Chief Justice Chaudhry's willingness to defy Musharraf?

FT: The sheer repressive behavior of General Musharraf in suspending the Chief Justice disturbed everyone. Chaudhry was placed under house arrest, his telephone lines cut and his children were not allowed to go to school.

Chaudhry was summoned to General Army Headquarters. Five generals were waiting for him, including the president and prime minister. Yet he refused to resign and did not admit his "crimes." His "NO" was unprecedented.

Although the Chief Justice had made it clear he is not a "political" person, he is known as a human right activist. His "NO" was one of the most political actions by any of the judges in the history of Pakistan. Over the past 60 years of so-called independence, the judiciary has provided the needed legal cover to the four military dictatorships. So the Chief Justice's "NO" was an unexpected act of bravery. His refusal to resign gave courage to many, who also joined with him saying "NO" to military rule.

The response to the suspension of the Chief Justice was also a reaction to the military regime's brutal implementation of a neoliberal agenda. There has been a sharp increase in the prices of everyday utilities, unemployment is on the rise and local industries are shutting down in the face of World Trade Organization regulations.

Despite increasing poverty, the economy continues to grow. But the growth has enriched the ruling elite and military generals, not ordinary people. So this difficult reality provided the masses with an opportunity to join hands with the lawyers and protest the Musharraf government.

ATC: Why were you arrested?

FT: I was arrested twice during the movement for restoration of the Chief Justice, which ended victoriously on the 20th July. I was arrested once again on 27th September, along with 10 other members of the Labour Party Pakistan. We were one of the first political parties that realized the potential of a mass movement in defense of Chief Justice Chaudhry.

The LPP threw ourselves into the movement from the very first day. We printed up and distributed a color poster with the slogan "in the footsteps of the lawyers, until the end of dictatorship." This poster proved to be popular and most of the bar associations posted it up. We participated alongside the lawyers in demonstrations throughout the country.

In fact the LPP postponed its scheduled fourth national conference to take part in the movement. On 26th March the LPP organized demonstrations in 11 cities in solidarity with the lawyers. I was personally threatened by the top police officers in Lahore who asked me to postpone the demonstrations. Of course we refused.

I was arrested at the LPP headquarters in Lahore on the 3rd May under a one-month detention order but released, under the pressure of a national campaign, four days later. I was arrested a second time just one month later and remained in jail for 15 days. The three-month detention order was withdrawn after the launching of an international campaign for my release.

In order to prevent anti-Musharraf demonstrations, the police arrested dozens of activists in the days before the scheduled 27th September demonstration outside the Lahore High Court. That day the court dismissed, on technical grounds, petitions challenging Musharraf's eligibility to run for president.

The large demonstration, including 200 LPP members, took place under a haze of tear gas. As soon as the rally was over, police followed and arrested me. They also arrested 11 other party members, most brick kiln workers. Although we all face charges under the Terrorist Act, most of us have been released on bail.

ATC: What is the political and economic situation in the Northwest Territory? Is it true, as we read, that the Taliban and al-Qaeda are making real inroads? How close are they to the Pakistan military intelligence?

FT: With the support of the military regime, the MMA, an alliance of religious parties has been in power since 2002 in North West Frontier Province, the province bordering Afghanistan. The MMA provincial government, despite their rhetoric against U.S. imperialism, has implemented policies of a neoliberal agenda.

There have been many stories of the close relationship between the Inter Services Intelligence Agency (ISI) and religious forces across the province. Over 260 military men were "kidnapped" by religious fanatics at the beginning of September 2007, only to be released on 9th September after an agreement with the military officials. Many believed that the military refused to fight with the fundamentalists and gave them up voluntarily.

The province's economic situation is deteriorating. The growth of religious fundamentalism in the area means less industrial activities. The fanatics are putting a lot of pressure on the public to adopt an "Islamic" way of life. For example, they have banned the barbers from shaving anyone. They deface advertising in which the face of a woman appears. There is less freedom of expression, even less for women.

Religious fundamentalists are not concerned with the economy, only with their definition of "morality." They do not consider as immoral such acts as exploiting workers, cheating customers, bribing officials, or beating their wives. Their interpretation of religion leads to a lack of appreciation of human life, just like the military regime.

This area is a safe haven for many religious fanatics from different nationalities. You can find a real "internationalism" among the fanatics in this area. This is where the Taliban get their moral, political and economic support. The military regime has lost control over the area and has no option but to close its eyes to the reality on the ground.

ATC: Why did Musharraf decide to militarily attack and destroy the Red Mosque?

FT: Over the last 20 years these religious fundamentalists have been aided and financed by many in the military establishment. General Musharraf attacked the Red Mosque in Islamabad after they got out of the military's control: The fanatics were out in the streets of Islamabad attempting to forcibly implant their cultural norms. The targets were women in particular. Mullahs at the mosque and students of their madrassa were demanding an immediate implementation of sharia law.

While the military regime had been part and parcel of U.S. imperialism's so-called "alliance to curb terrorism," at home, the generals encouraged religious fundamentalism, particularly in the mountainous areas. The generals did not expect the "ghost" they were building in far-off areas

would come to haunt them in the cities.

But the mullahs' behavior in Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan, became an embarrassment. By attacking them the regime could show U.S. imperialism their seriousness in curbing religious fundamentalism. So they attacked the Red Mosque with full force, killing hundreds of students and fanatics. Of course many students were ordinary Muslims who went to the madrassa because it is free.

The Labour Party Pakistan opposed the attack. The state has no right to bomb and kill people. Those suspected of criminal activity must be tried by the courts, not killed in a military operation. We wrote articles condemning the attacks in our weekly, Workers Struggle.

We do not share the view of many liberals that the only way to fight religious fundamentalism is to kill them. Repression cannot bring peace. Instead it promotes reactions including, as it has after the attack on Red Mosque, suicidal attacks on military and police personnel nationwide.

Religious fundamentalism cannot be defeated by the use of force. It has to be a political fight to expose the meaning of religious fundamentalism to the lives of ordinary people.

ATC: What forces support Musharraf?

FT: There is growing opposition to Musharraf regime after the victorious movement in defense of the Chief Justice. In fact, the ruling class is split from top to bottom. On 10th September 2007, General Musharraf deported Nawaz Sharif, the leader of the Muslim League. Sharif was attempting to return to Pakistan after seven years of forced exile. Musharraf's action was widely condemned within the country; he has lost more support from the middle classes.

Benazir Bhutto surprised many by attempting — from exile — to work out a power-sharing formula with Musharraf. The PPP, although controlled by the feudalists and capitalists, still has a tradition of opposing military regimes. In recent times I have been with many PPP activists in jail.

Today the overwhelmingly majority of the working class is opposed to the Musharraf regime. He has some support among the middle classes, but that is also fading rapidly. Still, a major section of the bourgeoisie supports him. In fact, they are enjoying their heyday under the military rule. Hand in hand with multinational companies, the ruling elite has seen the rate of profit soar.

Musharraf has vowed to resign as chief of the army once reelected (by a poll of members of the national parliament and provincial assemblies, not by popular vote) but he has promised that before. Taking off his uniform is a risk for Musharraf because it separates him from his real power base, the army.

The day after my September arrest there was a demonstration opposing Musharraf's nomination for another presidential term. Facing riot police with batons and tear gas, over 300 lawyers attempted to march down Constitution Avenue from the Supreme Court to the Election Commission. Police blocked their way, the lawyers threw stones and the officers hurled the stones, fired tear gas and charged the crowd. At least 20 lawyers and several journalists were beaten, many more were arrested.

ATC: How is the LPP preparing for the upcoming parliamentary elections?

FT: The Labour Party Pakistan has been preparing for the mid-January 2008 elections despite the fact that a general election under a military regime does not mean much. Given recent events, we think it may be possible to build an even broader left alliance that the alliance we are currently

involved in, the People's Democratic Movement, which is currently composed of seven left groups and parties. The LPP would like a broader alliance so that we could run an alternative candidate in each constituency, and so that no one will be forced to vote for a party in alliance with the military regime or for religious fundamentalists.

We would also like to force the overturn of the Election Commission rule that only those with an education are eligible to run. This discriminates against candidates from the working class. However broad an alliance we will be able to build, the LPP will be able to field several candidates — in fact I will run for the national assembly from Toba Tek Singh, my hometown.

Elections in Pakistan, where both capitalist and feudal forces buy votes, are run like a real “business” — and the left are not businesspeople. However the 2008 election will give us a chance to present an alternative to working people.

P.S.

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