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Pakistan

21st Century Socialism in Pakistan?

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Three Marxist political parties in Pakistan are coming together to merge into one party of the left. In retreat for many decades, this is an important first step for the revival of left-wing politics in Pakistan and strengthening the democratic politics of the country. A participant in this unity move explains the context and the challenges for the new united party of the left in Pakistan.

It is rare for Pakistan to be in the news for something other than suicide bombs, Hindu and Jew-hating mullahs and a very peculiar (and vulnerable) type of postcolonial democracy. A plethora of institutions, classes, ethnic groups and prominent individuals animates narratives of Pakistani modernity, most notably the omnipresent military and those who would challenge the men in khaki, including ethno-nationalists like those presently leading an insurgency in Balochistan.

Conspicuous by its absence in almost all such accounts is the Pakistani left. Even informed observers of Pakistan might have little or no knowledge of leftist forces in the country, at least in the contemporary period. Students of history will know that the Pakistani ruling class visited a great deal of repression upon leftists during the cold war when the country was the frontline against the Soviet bloc. Despite having to operate in extremely dire circumstances, the Pakistani left exercised not insignificant influence on the polity, and society more generally, until the 1980s.

Since the end of the cold war, however, the little space that the left previously garnered has, more or less, frittered away. Of course this has been the fate of the left in many countries. With the exception of the experiments in “21st century socialism” being effected in Latin America, the left continues to suffer from a crisis of identity in the face of changes in the global political economy associated with neo-liberalism.

The retreat of the Pakistani left has arguably been more damning and sustained than most, even if one limits the comparative frame to south Asia. It is, for instance, an uncomfortable truth that a majority of the more than 100 million Pakistanis below the age of 25 do not even know that there is a political left in its country, or indeed even that there is a competing ideology to the left of the dominant intellectual mainstream. The common sense notions that do exist are carry-overs from the cold war inasmuch as the term “communist” in Pakistan still connotes an irreligious world view.

Lighting the Lamp

There are, however, glimmers of hope amidst the relative gloom. On 11 November, three existing parties of the left – Labour Party Pakistan, Awami Party Pakistan and Workers Party Pakistan – will come together to form a new party with the goal of building a viable alternative to mainstream parties. This merger reflects recognition within leftist circles, both of the growing contradictions within the prevailing structure of power and the need for unity and maturity so as to take advantage of these contradictions.

Unity is of course a favourite slogan of the left. The Leninist tradition has, alongside unity, also emphasised ideological purity which, in far too many cases, has translated into sectarianism of the worst kind and continuous organisational divisions. The present merger is, in this regard at least, a first in Pakistan insofar as the three parties represent different Marxist traditions which have historically been distinctly opposed to one another.

Indeed, the merger process was impelled by younger activists within these three parties, and some outside of them, that do not carry the baggage of cold war sectarian conflicts (read: Stalinists, Trotskyites, Maoists, etc). It is also amongst the more recent entrants to the left fray that there is a greater critical reflection about the failings of 20th century socialist experiments, and a willingness to think in dynamic terms about the socialist project in the present century.

While there has been resistance from a segment of the older cadre, the imperative of unity, especially in the face of the inadequacies of the existing parties, appears to have won through. The most obvious manifestation of the left's retreat over the past two decades is in the composition of existing formations: a majority of the left's existing leadership and rank-and-file is the same as it was at the end of the cold war. In short, the left has, since the late 1980s, struggled to induct young people into its fold, or at the very least retain those who have joined the ranks. The latter failing is an indicator of the lack of dynamism in the left's analysis and political work, as young people, otherwise attracted to leftist ideas, are quickly alienated by its actual practices on the ground.

Needless to say, without a solid core of young activists, there is little chance that the left can make a dent in the cynical and patronage-based political order that exists in Pakistan. The left has not even been able to retain meaningful influence within its historic strongholds of industrial workers, small and landless farmers, and, of course, students.

One of the more promising initiatives on the left in recent times has been the revival of the National Students Federation (NSF), which between the 1960s and early 1980s was the flag-bearer of left politics amongst successive generations of young people. When Pervez Musharraf imposed a state of emergency in the country in November 2007, a small but vocal protest movement took shape on university campuses (mostly in Punjab), and the impetus of this movement led, some months later, to the NSF's reconstitution.

It is not by chance that the attempt to take back campuses from the right-wing organisations, and encourage left student activism more generally, has been followed by an initiative to merge existing parties of the left. If the present merger process is successful, the NSF will benefit greatly from institutional support that it currently lacks, while the new party will be able to focus on regenerating its creaking rank-and-file, and accordingly initiate the long process of establishing and deepening organic links between the party and the working people.

Once the Euphoria Subsides

There should be no doubt that the process of rehabilitating the left will be long, and often painful. In other words the actual merger is only a baby step in the right direction. There is no doubt that the profile of the left will improve, and those sitting on the outside looking in will no longer have an excuse to remain aloof from party politics on account of the left's internal bickering. Only time will tell, however, if the new formation can bring together Pakistan's long-suffering working people and oppressed nations.

Notwithstanding the obsession of the world's news media with the supposedly existential threat posed to Pakistan by the religious right, the left's arguably biggest immediate challenge will be to bridge the growing ethnic divide in the country. The Pakistani ruling classes' visceral mistrust of the democratic process and their undying commitment to a unitary nationalist ideology emphasising Islam and Urdu directly resulted in the secession of the eastern wing in 1971, and the deepening of conflicts within and across existing provincial boundaries since then.

The left has had to contend with the regionalisation of politics across south Asia and much of the world, so the challenge facing Pakistani leftists is not necessarily unique. Nevertheless, given the distinct rise of parochial trends in

recent times, projecting a sensitive and nuanced politics of class that foregrounds Pakistan's multinational character is, in the contemporary climate, a truly revolutionary task.

There are, at present, highly contrasting imperatives of doing politics in different regions of the country. The new party will likely try, as the left has done throughout Pakistan's history, to build alliances with ethno-nationalists who stand opposed to the Pakistani centre. But it will do so in a trying context – many ethno-nationalists, particularly in Sindh and Balochistan, now view the western powers, and the United States in particular, as the guarantor of their right to self-determination, a perspective that flies in the face of the anti-imperialist foundations of a left programme.

Imperialism remains a major impediment to the long-term democratisation of state and society, and here it is important to consider not just the role of the US, but also the states of the Arabian Gulf and China, multinational capital, and the international financial institutions (IFIs). The new party must move beyond sloganeering and develop a substantial understanding of the complex and contradictory ways in which imperialist influence is exercised. Further, and of particular importance is to develop an understanding of the extent to which an emergent middle class addicted to the neo-liberal economy and globalised cultural forms is a friend or foe of the subordinate classes.

This is a particularly pertinent question in light of the increasing polarisation between segments of the left and liberals who are inclined to view western governments and intervention in Pakistan and the wider region as necessary, desirable even, in the struggle to clip the wings of the religious right. In short, the struggle for secularism is all too often seen as an end in itself, rather than linked to the left's historic tasks of securing national liberation and class equality.

As in many postcolonial countries of Asia and Africa, in Pakistan too the fragmentation of progressive discourse and politics is explained in part by the rise of the non-governmental organisation (NGO). While there is merit to the argument that NGOs – donor funding more generally – have undermined radical political praxis, it is just as true that they have exposed some of the left's major failings. NGOs in Pakistan have, for instance, proven to be a vehicle for women's mobility, whereas the left, especially in its current incarnation, cannot claim to have made any meaningful contribution to the struggle against patriarchy. If nothing else, the new party must dedicate substantial time and effort to increasing the number of women activists among its ranks.

It is not just traditional failings that have to be redressed. Relatively taken-for-granted political positions and strategies must also be re-evaluated. The process of what around the world is today termed "informalisation" calls for critical reflection on traditional subjects of Marxist praxis such as the industrial working class and the peasantry. Questions of the "vanguard" and how to remake the left in a competitive democratic context – rather than viewing democracy as a "stage" that will pass into the "dustbin of history" – have been taken on by the left in many countries.

These questions will also have to be confronted by the Pakistani left and the new party which will come into existence on 11 November. According to the original timeframe that has been discussed to date, and will in all likelihood be confirmed at the founding conference, the first six months will be dedicated to creating a single party organisation where there are currently three, addressing outstanding ideological and political questions, and inducting new members. A party congress will then be called – probably by the summer of 2012 – to take stock of progress made and chart the party's priorities and strategies for a subsequent period of two years.

And Then There Was One

The reality is that this initiative will not mark a major turn in the fortunes either of the Pakistani left, or its

long-suffering working people. The collective resources of the three parties involved in the merger do not amount to the critical mass required to definitively reverse decades of retrogression and the myriad effects of neo-liberal globalisation. As was mentioned at the outset, however, the new party will be operating in a context that is nevertheless inviting, insofar as dominant forces are as divided today as at any other point in Pakistan's history.

The Pakistani state's hegemonic project is today badly weakened. Even if renewed attempts to keep it afloat on the educational, religious, media and household terrains of civil society are made on an almost daily basis by a well-oiled critical mass of state functionaries and their lackeys in the media, educational institutions and so on, counter-hegemonic impulses are increasingly widespread. Balochistan is the obvious example, but just as important is the substantial conflict within the corridors of power itself.

The imbalance in the civil-military equation in favour of the latter is no longer so glaring, in part because it is not possible in the current climate to justify military intervention in politics like in the past. The superior judiciary has emerged as a new power centre, not necessarily to the unambiguous benefit of the democratic process, but nevertheless a shift away from its traditional role of being a junior partner to the military; the alliance of superior judiciary and military has indeed been the bane of democracy for most of the country's 65 years.

The state's hegemonic project has been structured around Punjab's economic and political dominance (alongside the cultural pillars of Islam and Urdu). The left has long struggled for the establishment of a genuine federal system of government – a socialist one to boot – but now mainstream parties too have jumped on the federalism bandwagon. It goes without saying that none of these parties can be trusted to decisively undermine the unitary structure of power, but the very fact that the creation of a Siraiiki province has become a mainstream issue speaks volumes about the rumblings within Pakistan's extant power structure.

Of course the very fact that divisions within are becoming ever more apparent does not by any means guarantee a rupture. Just as likely, if not more so, is for identities such as religion (or sect) and ethnicity to harden and for oppressed social forces to become more bound to these identities than ever before. The left must also contend with the mundane everyday politics of patronage. In short, the left is tasked with both understanding what exists in the here and now and then fomenting meaningful and viable alternatives – in the realm of ideas and in actual political practice. There is no blueprint guaranteed to produce the desired result. But there is hope and expectation that this latest experiment with socialism in Pakistan will take us closer to where we want to go: a society in which the potentialities of all of humanity are allowed to develop freely. The choice today is as stark as it ever has been, that between socialism and barbarism.

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