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Pakistan

A defeat that generated feelings of victory

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It was one of best votes for any left candidate in decades during any general election held in Pakistan, Azad Kashmir and Gilgit Baltistan. The imprisoned Baba Jan, a candidate of Awami Workers Party, got around 4641 votes and came second in the list during the Gilgit Baltistan legislative assembly elections held on June 8 2015.

The ruling Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PMLN) candidate got 8245 votes and won the seat. He is the former ruler of Hunza estate with billions of rupees at his disposal. Pakistan Peoples' Party which had won this seat in the 2009 election trailed behind Baba Jan with 3201 votes and the most popular newly established bourgeois party of cricketer Imran Khan Tehreek Insaaf (Justice Movement) was in fourth position with less than 2291 votes. The religious Shia party Majlis Wahadat Muslimeen (MWM) was in fifth position 1041 votes, and the candidate of the party established by former dictator General Musharaf, called All Pakistan Muslim League, was on 254.

Baba Jan has been in jail since September 2014 and is serving a life sentence announced by an anti-terrorist court. His real crime was to help the victims of climate change in the area who had protested for fair compensation for all effects of Atta Abad artificial lake created by the land slide on River Hunza in 2010. Baba Jan led a mass movement as leader of Progressive Youth Front, where the town of Ali Abad was under control of the locals for four days. They were demanding the registration of murder case against the police officer who killed a protesting father and son.

Baba Jan was arrested in 2011, spent two years in jail before being released on bail and was arrested again after a brief period when a life sentence was awarded to him. A second life sentence was awarded to him few days later. The Appellate Court (Supreme Court GB) has acquitted Baba Jan and his 12 comrades in one case and an appeal is being launched against the second life sentence.

Baba Jan was allowed to take part in the election of 35 seat Gilgit Baltistan legislative assembly, 24 seats were to be contested directly and the rest filled through different quotas.

Baba Jan hails from a working class family. He had no billions of rupees at his disposal to spend on the election campaign. However, he had led the mass movements and was known throughout the most scenic Hunza valley bordering China, India and Afghanistan.

No party before

When Baba Jan and his comrades decided to take part in the elections, there was no formal structure of Awami Workers Party. AWP had decided not to build AWP in the valley because constitutionally Gilgit Baltistan is not part of Pakistan. And AWP respected the independent views of the comrades residing in the valley who were fighting for greater autonomy and rights.

However, if comrades in the valley decided to build a party on the name of Awami Workers Party GB, we would have no objection. It was already decided by Baba Jan and other comrades in the valley to name the new party as AWP GB but the process was still underway to establish the formal structures.

At the founding congress of AWP in September 2014, two slots on the federal committee were allotted to the

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comrades of Gilgit Baltistan. Two were elected including Baba Jan who was in jail and other was residing in Islamabad for his professional duties. Who would run the campaign?

A great comradely discussion started within AWP about what to do. The view that without the party, the election of Baba Jan was not much of benefit had quite a weight. The other view was "let's build the party during the election campaign". To start with, we must establish an organising committee of AWP in Hunza.

This was agreed after a lot of informal meetings and discussions among the top leadership of AWP in consultation with Baba Jan and the other FC member from the area.

The organising committee was elected at the first AWP membership meeting in Hunza at the beginning of May, a month before the election. A broader election campaign organising committee was established with the main activists of nationalists, progressives and AWP comrades led by veteran left activist Engineer Aman Ullah.

Baba Jan is a towering left activist with no hint of sectarianism. He had built great respect among all the progressive with his full time revolutionary work over a decade. As a student leader, he was the top leader of PPP youth. He left them to join Labour Party Pakistan in 2001 and became part of the top leadership of the party. His main contribution was to build Progressive Youth Front, a youth organisation started by supporters of LPP. LPP merged to form AWP in 2012 and Baba Jan became the first vice president of AWP.

Now after the elections, we have an AWP organising committee with new membership, and 1000 membership forms have been distributed among the youth. We hope to expand the network to other areas of the valley as well.

Personalities do matter

Baba Jan participated in all the mass movements in the valley along with the nationalist forces but still kept his socialist ideas intact and never joined a nationalist group. He took up the issue of the artificial lake and toured around Pakistan addressing press conferences, organising youth meeting to warn about the great dangers of climate change. The Atta Abad Lake became a national issue because of great personal initiatives.

He was also one of the main leaders of Awami Action Committee which organised a mass movement against the withdrawal of state subsidy on wheat. He was part of the sit-in for weeks and addressed thousands every day. He is a great orator. The movement forced the PPP government in 2013 to withdraw the suggestion of removing subsidies.

Baba Jan was always for the organisation of a left party, and is not an individual who is keen to promote himself above the party building process.

Baba Jan's name is very sweet, Baba literally means an old wise person and Jan means life. During the election campaign the most popular slogan with a great rhythm was "Teri Jan Meri Jan Baba Jan Baba Jan". It means your life and my life is Baba Jan.

Campaign

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We had no amount in our party account that could be used for elections. The decision was not calculated as the sudden announcement by PMLN government to go for election had surprised everyone. The PMLN government had just signed a 140 Billion dollar agreement with the Chinese to build an economic corridor from Gwader port to China which would pass through Gilgit Baltistan. An impression was created that the valley would be the main beneficiary. They wanted to be on the receiving end of this political mileage.

An immediate donation appeal was sent to all friends and comrades inside and outside. However, AWP had been raising funds again and again on several initiatives during the year. So there was not much hope.

The posters, flexes and party flags were printed and sent from Lahore. It takes nearly 48 hours to send things to Gilgit from Lahore. Several students from Gilgit who had been working along with Baba Jan had already announced they would go back home to take part in the election campaign. This was a great beginning. Young students from elite private universities opted to carry all this printed matter with them all the way to Gilgit. As the first batch of students with printed matter arrived, it was snatched within hours by supporters who wanted to take this to their own areas.

The constituency is spread over hundreds of miles around the mountains and valleys; it was one of the largest constituencies with 36,000 voters. "Send us another 1000 AWP flags and 10,000 posters" was the call we received on the day.

Flag making also takes time. Within three days another round of printed matter was sent. The first great rally was taken out on May 24 which surprised everyone. People of the area brought their own vehicles, motorcycles and tractors for this rally. The second rally that I participated in on March 31 was an historic one. Never in the history of this constituency had so many people with hundreds of cars, motorcycles and tractors participated in a very charged rally. We had the largest public meeting in the home town of PMLN candidate and challenged his royal authority.

Here is what one young socialist and member AWP Islamabad Ammar Rashid accurately wrote about the election campaign after his return from the area.

"Just returned from Hunza after the conclusion of Baba Jan's election campaign, where I was witness to some truly remarkable sights.

In the middle of the majestic Karakorams, thousands of young working class men and women have staged a revolt against the political and economic status-quo under the leadership of AWP's socialist candidate for the GB Assembly, Comrade Baba Jan.

Baba Jan remains a political prisoner but his decision to run for election from behind bars has unlocked the floodgates of pent-up disaffection among the young and working poor of Hunza. The already-acknowledged popularity he enjoyed has now spilled over into visible, effective mass support the likes of which has been seldom witnessed in this most remote of regions. The red and white colors of the AWP now dot the landscape of Hunza from Nasirabad to Chipursan.

This was no run-of-the-mill election campaign. Something that started off without any funds organisational experience transformed into a mass uprising in a matter of days. People donated their homes and shops as campaign offices across the valley. Others gave whatever little they had for arranging transport and logistics for rallies, often on the spot as organisers appealed for assistance. Several others contributed with original poetry and music that became the mainstay of the public gatherings.

For the first time in Hunza's history, women were at the forefront of a political campaign, opening their own election offices, organising their own rallies and leading the fray with their own improvised, heavily-charged slogans and speeches. Compared to the patronage-based political logic of all other parties in Hunza, this was a movement truly

started, owned and sustained by the people.

This was not empty-minded, hero-worshipping populism either. Among all the activists involved, serious questions were being debated, from the nature of class exploitation, to Gilgit-Baltistan's place in the federation, to debates on national identity, to the reality of state hegemony, repression and exclusion, to the legitimacy of the heavily classist electoral process, to the significance of gender equality, to the need for inter-faith, inter-sect and inter-ethnic solidarity. There was a palpable sense of an opportunity to critically engage with contradictions of society and state that are all too often brushed under the carpet.

As Gilgit-Baltistan votes today, the imprisoned Baba Jan will be up against the combined might of the traditional Hunza royalty, established bureaucratic mandarins, and the political and financial might of the heavily-moneyed mainstream parties. For his working class supporters, even arranging transport for remote voters on election day will be nigh impossible, much less competing with the millions in election handouts being distributed by the likes of Marvi Memon of the PMLN and others.

Whatever the election result though, Baba Jan has, through his defiance, commitment and ideological perseverance, laid the foundations for genuine political transformation in Gilgit-Baltistan and created space for the flowering of a renewed Leftist political consciousness. It is merely a start and one with a potentially deeply hazardous future, especially in the face of severe human and financial resource constraints. But it is this peerless example from Pakistan's ignored periphery that progressives must look to if we are to resurrect the Left in Pakistan.”

After the defeat

After the defeat of Baba Jan, there is no unpleasant feeling of defeat. The defeat has generated more energy among the comrades. It has provided comrades an unforgettable experience of mass mobilisation without real resources. Everyone I talked to spoke of a great campaign and that we have not lost anything, more than that there is feeling of victory underneath the defeat. All supporters of the campaign congratulated each other.

The mood was set by Baba Jan himself from behind bars.

“There is a victory in the defeat. No one has challenged the former royalty as powerfully as we did. I had no block vote of a tribe, cast, and area or on religious basis. I came second at almost all polling stations. I got votes from everywhere unlike my billionaire opponents who had block votes in some areas. It was working class and working people everywhere who rose from the shackles of slavery of the corrupt capitalist system and voted for me fearlessly. It was the youth who had no votes but were seen everywhere chanting slogans of revolution. May be good that I did not win, because of the massive expectations that have been generated from my campaign, and maybe I would have not been able to meet those. Now we have more time to prepare. I have won the hearts and soul of my class and that is a victory and not a defeat”.

He told me a day after the election campaign. “Please convey my thanks to our friends abroad and inside Pakistan that supported my campaign anyway they could”. He repeated it several times.

A political and organisational follow up is being discussed. But the most important task is to strengthen the campaign for the release of all three climate change victims who are still behind bars, including Baba Jan.