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Pakistan

Protest the sentence of Baba Jan and the other activists

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The decision of Gilgit Baltistan Supreme Appellate Court on June 9 to overturn Chief Court's acquittal of Baba Jan and 11 other Awami Workers Party activists is politically motivated. It does not meet the standards of impartiality and fairness. "If highlighting this shortcoming of the short order is tantamount to contempt of court, I am in contempt of court," AWP Pakistan president Abid Hassan Minto said on June 16, speaking at a press conference held to announce a mass campaign for the immediate release of Baba Jan and other activists' and the cancellation of all politically motivated cases registered against them on trumped up charges of terrorism.

Minto said his party had tried seeking justice from courts but that the Appellate Court's short order had made it clear that the singular purpose served by all state institutions in remote regions like G-B was to perpetuate control of the regions through local elites and to suppress indigenous movements of the people for democratic rights and civil liberties enshrined in the Pakistani Constitution.

Minto said the battle for justice for Baba Jan and other activists, particularly, and GB people, generally, would now be taken to streets all across the country. His party, the Awami Workers Party would also raise the issue at international forums.

The major demands of the campaign are:

- immediate release for Baba Jan and other activists
- cancellation of the case filed on trumped up charges,
- publication of judicial inquiry report
- punishment for policemen involved in the killing of two locals during a 2010 demonstration.

Background

On 9 June 2016, the GB Supreme Appellate Court sentenced Baba Jan and 11 others political activists to 40-year prison terms while hearing the state's appeal against the GB Chief Court's decision. Earlier, the Chief Court had set aside Baba Jan and others' conviction in the matter by an anti-terrorism court in September 2014. The Appellate Court judgment is not unanimous (2:1). It is a short order with no reason. A detailed judgment is still awaited.

Baba Jan and other activists' alleged crime was that they had raised their voices for the thousands of families affected by the massive landslides of 2010. The landslides had caused an artificial lake in the Attabad area of Hunza in 2010, rendering thousands of families homeless. Baba Jan and other activists had mobilised the people of the region, holding scores of demonstrations, to seek fair compensation and social support for these families.

The timing of the June 9 verdict raises suspicions about its fairness and impartiality. Baba Jan was scheduled to contest a by-election for Hunza-6 constituency in the Gilgit-Baltistan legislative assembly on May 28, 2016. Three days before the scheduled election, Baba Jan's campaign team comprising local leadership of the AWP GB had led a massive rally of his supporters including scores of women and youngsters. On the same day, Zafar Iqbal of the Pakistan Peoples' Party, not a contestant himself, had approached the Supreme Appellate Court seeking directives for Baba Jan's disqualification on grounds that he had been convicted by an ATC. It is widely known in the Hunza-6

constituency that Iqbal is working in collusion with PML-N contestant, a son of the G-B governor and a member of the traditional ruling family of the region.

Completely ignoring the fact that Baba Jan's conviction had been overturned by the Chief Court, the Appellate Court directed that by-elections be postponed till a decision was reached in the G-B government's appeal against Chief Court's decision. This was not unexpected since the Election Tribunal of the G-B had already accepted Baba Jan's nomination papers and allowed him to contest the election from jail.

Hunza 6 constituency is an important part of the G-B region. The constituency is located on the Pakistan-China border and serves as the main link between the two countries. With the launch the \$46 billion Pakistan-China Economic Corridor (CPEC), the importance of this road link will multiply manifold for the two states and their private capitalists.

In this backdrop, it is very clear that the PML-N led federal government is extending its patronage to the traditional elite of Hunza (GB governor) to prevent the possibility of a candidate with mass public support to enter the G-B legislative assembly. The government and its capitalist allies know very well that Baba Jan will bring with him the concerns of the working men and women of the region to the assembly otherwise dominated by the elite and not allow any corruption in the multibillion dollar project.

The government has already witnessed the overwhelming support for Baba Jan in the June 2015 general elections. Baba Jan had defeated two of the three candidates affiliated with mainstream political parties, standing second only to the PML-N candidate who was backed by networks of patronage extending from Hunza to the federal capital of Islamabad.

Since then, mass support for Baba Jan's candidacy has further increased. All public opinion surveys done in the constituency indicate a land slide victory for Baba Jan. After losing mass support in favour of an ordinary working class hero, the government was clearly looking for an alternative to keep him out of the electoral race.

Baba Jan's ordeal has exposed the colonial nature of administration in the region. Constitutionally, GB is not a part of Pakistan. It was given the status of a province with limited self-governance in 2009, including the right for the people to elect their representatives to the GB legislative assembly. However, the Pakistani federal government remains in control of all major decisions related to the region. The judges to the Chief and the Appellate Courts depend for their extension in office on the Pakistani prime minister. Whosoever comes to power in Pakistan co-opts local elites and remotely controls the region through them.

The administration should beware that by putting Baba Jan and other activists behind bars it will not succeed in silencing them or controlling the movement of working men, women and children that they have helped build in the region. Baba Jan and others' sentences will not be accepted by the people who have developed a connection with their struggle, reflected in the widespread popularity of the slogan: Teri Jan Meri Jan, Baba Jan Baba Jan, (Your Dearest and Mine, Baba Jan Baba Jan).

Protest

The Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) is taking up the case of Baba Jan and his comrades; you can read what they say in detail [here](#).

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They are urging people to write letters to the authorities calling them to immediately release Baba Jan and 11 other defenders and withdraw the case filed on trumped up charges. The state must also make public the judicial inquiry report and penalize the policemen responsible for the killing of two locals during the 2010 demonstration. Please also denounce the continuous marginalization of human rights defenders in Gilgit.

The AHRC will write a separate letter to the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders calling for his intervention into this matter.

To support this case, please click [here](#).