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WSF

The Karachi Social Forum and its international significance

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Europe solidaire sans frontières (ESSF) participated in the World Social Forum in Karachi. The report which follows is not descriptive (number of seminars and so on.), but seeks to share some elements of analysis on this new experience and its significance - taking account of the fact that this was the author's first visit to Pakistan.

The report is, then, “foreign” and does not claim to be based on a real knowledge of the country. It is on the other hand informed by the comparative experience of the preceding forums in Porto Alegre, Europe and India. A more detailed report will be drawn up later.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/kwsf3.jpg>]

After Bamako (Mali) and Caracas (Venezuela) last January, Karachi constituted the third wing of the World Social Forum, in its “polycentric” version of 2006. Meeting from March 24-29 in the main industrial centre and port of Pakistan, it proved to be a success both in terms of numbers and of politics. The attendance - more than 30,000 - was twice as big as predicted and the forum represented an event with many new aspects for this country.

There were certainly a good number of organisational problems, from the spectacular absence of any dustbins on the meeting site (a sports complex) to the cancellation of seminars or unforeseen changes in the programme - which the Pakistani press has dwelt on. But the organizers had not had an easy task.

The destructive earthquake of October 2005, in the north of the country in Kashmir, forced the delay of the forum, initially planned for the end of January. For several months financial resources and activist energies were devoted to aiding a population which had been very hard hit and was threatened by the rigours of the Himalayan winter. Moreover, the social and citizen-based dynamic which had contributed to the success of previous forums was not self-evidently present in Pakistan.

Pakistan, land of expansion of forums

In its original homeland (a part of Latin America and of southern Europe) the launch of the WSF benefited from a new context (the emergence of resistance to capitalist globalisation), but also from the renewal of unitary traditions during the 1990s, already involving a notable diversity of social actors.

The forums have enlarged and strengthened these unitary traditions, but they have profited from a dynamic of convergence which was already underway. In other countries, in the lands of expansion, it is rather the existence of the world process which serves as reference.

It is this which allows the initiation of the dynamic of convergence specific to the social forums, which constitutes their “trademark”. It is always difficult to seek to understand the characteristics of a country that one knows very little of, but, at the risk of caricaturing a necessarily complex reality, it seems to me that such has been the case in Pakistan.

The experience of the Karachi WSF is all the more interesting to analyse inasmuch as it took place in a very diversified country (as much in social structure as in regional and national identities); under a military regime; placed on the Afghan front line of Washington's “war on terror”; subject to the growing pressure of religious fundamentalist

currents, called here "sectarian movements" and capable of murderous violence [1]; in a region dominated since the partition of 1947 by Indo-Pakistani antagonism, which has now become a nuclear stand off. [2] It is also the first time that a forum of this breadth has met in one of the biggest Muslim countries in the world.

The success of the Karachi WSF was not then in any way banal. It should be analysed in its specificities. It is obviously the job of the Pakistanis (and those who know Pakistan well) to do it. But the perception, without pretension, of an old habitu  of forums can nonetheless be also useful, at least to raise certain specificities which are the most apparent to a "foreign" onlooker. I would like first to sum up briefly on what, in my eyes, has given the event its significance.

Declension of a success

First element of success, and a major one, the WSF in Karachi opened a democratic and secular space between the pressure of the military regime and that of the fundamentalist, conservative currents. The site of the forum was alive. It was a permanent theatre of demand-based demonstrations.

Musical groups and poets gave an emotional power to the political speeches. In the seminars, some women wearing shawls or veils removed them - in Pakistan, there are many who wear no headgear. Women were numerous and mixed company was the rule in the spaces and the tribunes of the forum. The atmosphere was joyous, the speech and behaviour liberating.

Second element of success, diverse popular movements effectively appropriate the democratic and secular space opened by the forum: small fishers from the Karachi region; peasants from the province of Punjab; trades unionists in struggle against privatisation; nationalists from Sind (where Karachi is located), Baluchistan (in the west) or Kashmir (in the north); and a myriad of women's organisations. As at the WSF in Mumbai, in January 2004, the movements were participants as such in the forum, impelling the space, more than is often the case in Europe or in Latin America. The WSF in Karachi thoroughly merited the name of social forum. It expressed the radicalism of democratic and social demands.

Third element of success, the demand of solidarity was also forcefully affirmed on the most burning questions. Since the partition of 1947, Pakistan and India have lived in a situation of open war or armed truce. Despite administrative difficulties, an Indian delegation was able to get to Karachi, as a Pakistani delegation had attended the WSF in Mumbai (Bombay), two years ago. The situation in Kashmir was the theme of seminars and an important plenary where the combatant movements from the two sides of the "line of control" met for the first time thus in public. [3] Even if dialogue has not really been installed between them (that's an understatement), the event was striking.

Fourth element of success, the presence of youth and the return of politics. Hundreds of youth, particularly from Karachi, participated in the forum as volunteers. For many among them, it was their first political experience - sometimes a little disconcerting, it seems, because of the changes of programme. More generally, the forum allowed a reaffirmation of the authenticity of the political terrain in the face of the military regime which sterilises it in the name of the imperatives of national security and faced with the fundamentalist movements which sterilise it in the name of religious imperatives. The forum has reopened the debate on the place of politics and it is not the least of its results.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/kwsf4.jpg>]

Muslim identity is not necessarily above all religious. It can be nationalist and cultural as seems for example to have traditionally been the case for the (regional) national movement in Sind. But the Pakistani state is constituted with a

confessional reference base. A policy of official Islamisation was subsequently pursued, in particular by the military dictatorship of general Zia which made Islam a state ideology. But Islam being very diverse in Pakistan, that has exacerbated the “sectarian” conflicts between Muslims. The experience of the Karachi WSF allows us to perceive, in such a context, the centrality of the secular demand, a necessary condition for the realisation of the social unity of the exploited and the oppressed divided by the religious reference.

Fifth element of success, the forum constituted a new stage of a regional process, in South Asia, begun in India during the forums of Hyderabad (2003) and Mumbai (2004). It also initiated a unitary dynamic in Pakistan itself, which should continue: discussion was immediately opened, after the experience of Karachi, on the regular organisation of a Pakistani social forum. To be followed up and confirmed, then.

Some problems

The tensions, contradictions and setbacks should also be analysed. I will content myself with raising five here - mentioning first the organisational problems (like the deficient information on programming) which probably made life difficult for the individual “unorganised” participants.

1. **The MQM.** The relationship to the governmental institutions in the towns or the countries where the forums are held has nearly always caused problems. In Karachi, the tensions crystallized on the attitude to be taken to the MQM, the “Mohajir” movement [4] which dominates the municipality and which many formations of the Pakistani left judge “ethnicist”. It was not integrated in the programme of the forum.

2. **Integration.** A certain number of movements which should logically have participated in the forum did not do so. This was notably the case with the feminist organisations of Lahore. The process of integration in the dynamic of the forums of all the components concerned is not then finished. This problem goes back probably as much to questions of functioning (opening of structures) and orientation as of “visibility”.

3. **Visibility.** the contrast was striking between the composition of the platform during the forum's opening ceremony (where there were no social movements) and the place occupied by the movements in the space of the forum itself or in number of seminars. This contrast is still more accentuated in the area of “international visibility” of the Pakistani forum (at least before its holding), which was very reduced. This problem of representation and visibility, of the gap between the composition of the central platforms and the movements which ensure the social character of the forums, is obviously not specific to the case of Pakistan.

4 **On the left.** This polemic on the nature of the social forums divided the Pakistani left. Some political movements supported the process from the beginning. This is particularly the case of the Labour Party Pakistan (LPP) whose activists were perfectly at home in the forum. The Awami Tehreek (from Sind) was very present. A little before the forum, a front was set up between six left organisations [5]. That probably facilitated a broader participation of left forces in the forum.

5. Internationally 58 countries were “represented” at the forum in Karachi. But, outside of South Asia, the national delegations were generally small. These were generally made up of people already concerned by Pakistan or the region (with exceptions, concerning in particular the Latin Americans). The French delegation was probably the most numerous “outside Asia”. From the CRID to ESSF via the Frères des Hommes, the French were in the main already “into” Asia - although the presence of unions like the CGT and the Italian CGIL should be mentioned.

From this point, the forum in Karachi was an essentially Pakistani forum with a significant regional dynamic but a weak global participation. It was supposed to be a wing of the World Social Forum. But it was not “taken up” by the components and the international bodies of the WSF in the same way as the forums of Bamako and Caracas.

Very significantly, on the very eve of the forum in Karachi, the International Council of the WSF met... in Nairobi. It was certainly good to prolong without delay the African dynamic of Bamako to prepare the WSF 2007 in Kenya, but it would have been preferable to hold the March IC in Karachi and the following, planned in October, in Nairobi. The consequences, in Pakistan, of the lack of international support made themselves felt, including on the financial plane, and the Pakistanis clearly posed the organisational problems at a meeting during the forum, with the members of the IC of the WSF present.

Given the difficulties and the stakes (national and regional) of the Pakistani forum, the WSF in Karachi particularly merited being supported internationally. It was also a unique occasion to learn about a pioneer experience. But Asia remains the poor relation of solidarity in Europe and Latin America. Despite the role played since Mumbai by the Indians, the international bodies of the WSF reproduced instead of correcting this very unequal perception of the world.

Provisional conclusions

This only amounts to a partial, indeed fragmentary, balance sheet. All critical commentaries would be welcome. But by way of a provisional conclusion, I will stress the following points:

1. The functionality of the forums. With the emigration of the WSF outside of its Latino-European countries of origin - after Mumbai (2004), Bamako and Karachi (2005) - the utility of the forums (of this type of forum) has now been tested positively in very varied contexts. Nothing is universal or eternal, but the adaptability of this form of action (and of the process which supports it) has proved remarkable. It has been tested on the international level in countries where the social movements are strong or weak, in favourable and unfavourable political situations, in highly defensive or counter-offensive conjunctures.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/KWSF1.jpg>]

Of course, each forum has its own characteristics and functions. But the form “forum/process”, “meeting space/place of impulsion of actions” clearly responds to needs linked to the period and not only to a specific political geography. We already knew it, but this is a confirmation of it. The forums allow the rallying of resistance (in its diversity) in a time of globalisation, when the crisis of the socialist reference has not been overcome and the modes of centralisation of the past period (around the workers' movement or armed struggles) do not work as before.

2. The significance of the Pakistani experience. The Karachi forum illustrates this first point of conclusion. The political situation in the country is not good. There are key struggles, sometimes victorious, but the trade union and social movement remains fragmented and globally weak. The country is extremely divided. Social structures are often very different according to province, or even inside the same province like the Punjab. The whole history of the Pakistani state since its formation in 1947 is traversed by conflicts between the elites of “ethnic” groups and provinces for the control of the administration and the army (which are dominated by the Punjabis, but also the Mohajirs). Regional or national conflicts are numerous (Baluchis, Pashtoons, Kashmiris, Sindhis and so on) and can lead to internal wars. Statistics show 97% of Pakistan's population are Muslims, with all the ambiguity linked to the use of categories of religious (or cultural?) appearance against a complex social reality (don't doubt it, there are Pakistani atheists). But we have seen the multiplicity (Sunni, Shiite, Ahmadiyya, Sufis and so on) and the violence that this “unanimous” percentage hides.

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Despite all this, the forum in Karachi was a dynamic place of popular convergence. It is this which gives us something to reflect on, and which ensures that this experience its national and international significance.

3. Internal contradictions. A recurrent polemic on the role of the NGOs in the process of the WSF re-emerged in Karachi. The "left" critique of the forums is often formulated in too abstract, too "external" a fashion. The success of the forums has nothing obvious about it, it expresses something new. To be pertinent, the critique should then begin by understanding this and recognising this; it should be formulated in, let us say, a more "internal" fashion.

The evolution of the world of NGOs poses a problem? Effectively. Some, in the name of global civil society, weaken the local or national activist fabrics. In the name of a citizen-based discourse, they stifle social radicalism. In the name of democracy, they monopolise visibility to the detriment of otherwise more representative organisations. But the world of the NGOs is not homogeneous; and it is not alone in creating a problem. The same is true of the trade union bureaucracies, intolerant "rank and file" movements, authoritarian political leaderships, of naïfs and cynics and (oh how many!) egotistical personalities and manipulative individuals. In short, it is not enough to denounce the NGOs (many of whom have their place in the forums) to ensure the popular dynamic of the process.

The poor are, in society, invisible. On the contrary, the forums should ensure the visibility of the most exploited and oppressed. Since the very beginning in Porto Alegre this has not been self-evident. The gap can be large, inside the forum, between the "street" and the platforms. Since 2001, some progress has been accomplished, but the process is not one-way - there are also regressions.

Just as the experience of the forums merits being defended against a "left" critique which is too "external", it is necessary to take seriously the contradiction at work among the people of the forums. We should neither hope nor wish for a process without contradictions. But for a new forum to merit the name "social", the most audible voice should be that of the most exploited and oppressed, their movements should be at the heart of the process.

4. Globalisation of resistance. The process of internationalisation of forums began from 2002 with the European Social Forum in Florence. It experienced a qualitative leap with Hyderabad (India) and Mumbai in 2003-2004. It is today again the case with Bamako and Karachi (Caracas occupies a specific place in the deepening of political themes). That will again be true in 2007 with Nairobi.

All the regions are not yet integrated in the same way in the process (weakness in Northern and Eastern Europe), nor represented in the same way in the international bodies (under-representation of Asia and Africa). But it is very rare to see a movement spread so rapidly in the world (in more than 40 years of militant activity, it is only the second time that I have seen it). A remark which goes, more generally, for the whole of the global justice and anti-war movement.

The forum in Karachi was made possible by this world expansion of the process; in return it gives it dynamism in a country and a zone of strategic conflicts. A sole regret: that too few organisations in Europe and Latin America took this opportunity to acquaint themselves with the stakes in South Asia.

[1] The non-Muslim minorities can be victims of discrimination in Pakistan. But the sectarian violence of the fundamentalist movements is above all exerted between Muslim currents, Shiites, Sunni and so on.

[2] The territories with Muslim majorities which today constitute Pakistan (to the west of the sub-continent) and Bangladesh (to the east) were only separated from India at the time of "partition" during decolonisation in 1947.

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[3] Kashmir, in the North, near the Himalayas, is divided in two by the "Line of Control" which separates the armies of Indian occupation on the one hand and the Pakistanis on the other.

[4] The Mohajirs are the immigrants who came during the partition of 1947 from the Indian states with a Hindu majority: Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and so on. They moved in great number to the province southeast of Sind and its capital, Karachi.

[5] The six organisations have set up the Awami Jamhoori Tehreek (AJT) (Peoples Democratic Movement). They are the National Workers Party (NWP), the Labour Party Pakistan (LPP), the Awami Tehreek (AT), the Pakistan Mazdoor Kissan Party (PMKP), the Pakistan Mazdoor Mehaz (PMM) and the Meraj Mohammed Khan group (MMKG).