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Pakistan

Can the Awami Workers' Party imagine a new and more concrete basis for struggle in the cause of women's liberation?

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“We condemn the co-option of the question of women’s emancipation by neo-liberal forces through the de-contextualized celebration of Women’s Day as another opportunity to further the neo-liberal development agenda.” Awami Workers’ Party’s General Secretary Farooq Tariq started his statement on Women’s Day with this powerful line.

The statement came a week after the party held its first convention on issues central to the liberation of women. The communiqué issued at the end of the convention carried 11 points that will serve as guiding principles of the party’s position on women.

The document was drafted by AWP federal committee members Farzana Bari and Ismat Shahjahan. Sixty delegates from all over the country approved the communiqué to be presented to the AWP leadership at the party’s first congress to be held later in March. It was also unanimously adopted by 400 party members who attended the open session of the convention.

In the communiqué, the party demands elimination of all social, economic and administrative structures that have led to gender-based exploitation. It promises 33 percent representation of women in all units of the party, and calls for laws against forced marriage and verbal divorce etc. It demands that the state play a positive role in cases of violation of rights of women. The communiqué, says Farooq Tariq, is the AWP’s way of celebrating Women’ Day.

“These principles enable better mobilization,” Tariq says. “They serve not only as a way of encouraging women to come forward in the party, but also challenging the unfortunate sexist trends in the Left.”

Asked why the party had chosen 33 percent representation specifically, he says the party wanted even more. “But we have to start somewhere. Starting with 25 per cent itself would be a feat.”

Nighat Said Khan, founder of the Women Action Forum, however, has reservations about the document. She believes the party is not addressing some fundamental problems of women’s empowerment.

“[The AWP] still has a confused and simplistic understanding of what is called the woman’s question in Marxism and socialist thought. They put the blame on what they call patriarchy of the feudal and capitalist elite. But Marxist and socialist feminists who identify and understand patriarchy would include all men since all men have power over women,” she says.

She feels that by not questioning traditional marriage and patriarchal family, and by retaining the “NGO mantra” of 33 percent representation, the AWP communiqué leaves room for a lot of improvement.

The General Secretary of the leftist National Students Federation (NSF), Aliya Khan, does not share Miss Khan’s views. “The communiqué brings women closer to political training,” she says. “The party, from the start, will encourage women within its ranks and must create spaces for women to develop its positions.”

She says that while the old Left had worked with women, there had been gap of nearly 30 years since spaces were actively created for women to come forward for political mobilization.

Neelum Hussain, founder of Simorgh Women's Resource Centre and also a member of WAF, too, is excited about the communiqué.

"The kind of affirmative action AWP is calling for, mainstream political parties do not demand it," she says.

She says the communiqué is against regressive laws, checks sexual violence and touches on various aspects of WAF's charter on women's rights, education and segregation in schools.

Hussain recalls that Pakistan ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1995.

"A non-bureaucratic, post-Beijing process was set in place during Benazir's tenure. This fell by the wayside under the Sharif government, for which it was not an issue," she said.

Many questions, however, still remain un-answered. There is a critique of the AWP's attitude towards gender politics, which is as such a wider critique of contemporary left-wing thought on women's liberation. The critique attacks the traditional statist-socialist assumption that patriarchy exists only due to capitalist relations of production in society, and can therefore be abolished automatically when capitalist relations of production are overthrown in a revolutionary upheaval. As a consequence of such analysis, traditional statist-socialist movements and regimes tended to focus on "purely class-based" struggles as their main strategy for mass mobilization. The understanding was that patriarchy would disappear easily once the capitalist state was overthrown.

Historical experience shows that not only did this approach weaken the Left's mass appeal by losing its potential support from the radicalization of women's struggles, it also hindered the otherwise considerable efforts for gender equality in 20th century socialist regimes.

The AWP as a political organization of the Left has still to sort out debates arising from this critique, both within the ranks of the party and among intellectual and popular circles in broader Pakistani society. It remains to be seen how far they can carry out the principles laid out in the AWP Women's Convention. Even more importantly, it remains to be seen how far the party's activists can imagine a new and more concrete basis for struggle in the cause of women's liberation.