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Pakistan

International Solidarity campaign for Baba Jan relaunched

- News from around the world -

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We have been campaigning several years for the release of the ten “climate change prisoners” in Gilgit-Baltistan (north of Pakistan), the most prominent of them being Baba Jan [1] He was sentenced to life imprisonment, together with Shokrullah Baig, Iftikhar Hussain, Mahar Ali, Alleem Ullah, Irfan Ali, Rashid Minhas, Musa Baig, Sher Khan and Sher Ali.

As it is often the case in Pakistan, these progressive activists were charged under anti terrorist laws, while they never promoted any terrorist activities. This very heavy sentence raised a lot of protests in Pakistan and the Appellate Court (Supreme Court) of Gilgit-Baltistan eventually declared them non guilty in one case for which they were given a life sentence. Six of the ten were then released: Alleem Ullah, Irfan Ali, Rashid Minhas, Musa Baig, Sher Khan and Sher Ali.

This is not the only democratic victory won in court recently in Pakistan. 13 trade union leaders from Labour Qaumi Movement in the textile town of Faisalabad had also been accused of “terrorism” and condemned to decades of imprisonment [[See <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/>] the key word Faisalabad.]. Last April, Lahore High Court decided to release all of them. Six of them have actually been released, and were warmly welcomed by workers. Seven are still in jail, because the court decision has not pardoned some fine which they have to pay (the six others were released after they paid that fine).

In Gilgit-Baltistan too, six have been released. But Baba Jan, Shokrullah Baig, Iftikhar Hussain and Mahar Ali had received from the anti-terrorist court a second life sentence, on which the Gilgit Appellate Court has not acted yet. Thus, they are still jailed.

Background

Baba Jan and his comrades were called “climate change prisoners” because they have campaigned for the victims of a massive landslide which killed in January 2010, 19 people and blocked the Hunza river: a 23 kilometer artificial lake was formed and three villages got submerged. After mass mobilizations, the government agreed to pay compensation. However, he did not pay it properly to all, thus people demonstrated while the chief minister was visiting the area. The police opened fire and killed two, a father and son, provoking mass anger. During four days, people occupied the city of Ali Abad, demanding that a legal case be registered against the police officers responsible for the killings. A government office was put to fire.

Baba Jan along with 100 people was arrested. Himself was accused of sedition and subject to severe torture during three days. Imprisoned in 2011, Baba Jan remained in jail for nearly two years, before he was released on bail on 27th June 2013 after a massive national (and international) campaign. But he was arrested again after an anti terrorist court sentenced him to life in September 2014.

Baba Jan is the chairperson of the Progressive Youth Front of Gilgit-Baltistan and a member federal committee Awami Workers Party, a left wing political party formed in 2012 after merger of three left wing parties. He is a social activist. While in jail, he helped to unite the Shia and Sunni prisoners and demand for implementation of jail manuals. Due to a united protest, the jail authorities were forced to give fresh milk, bread and meat to all the prisoners. The medical doctors started coming in the jail hospital due to this struggle. However, Baba Jan had to pay a heavy price of uniting the two opposite religious groups. A case was registered against him to incite the prisoners. Anti terrorist clauses

were included in the police case.

Running in elections

To widen the defense mass campaign, the Committee for the Release of political prisoners decided to put Baba Jan as a candidate in the forthcoming general elections to be held on 8th of June and to organize one major rally from Hunza to Gilgit jail on 1st of June 2015. Surprisingly, the nomination papers of Baba Jan have been accepted by the returning officer of the Gilgit Baltistan Assembly Constituency 6 Hunza while he is still in jail. He will be first person in Gilgit history who will contest general elections from jail. The announcement of contesting elections has generated enthusiasm especially among the youth. First positive consequence: the jail authorities behavior towards Baba Jan has changed for the time being and he is been treated as an important personality.

There are 20 candidate contesting elections from this constituency. The other main candidates are from ruling Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz, Pakistan People's Party of Bhutto, Pakistan Tehreek Insaaf from cricketer Imran Khan and Majlis Wahdat UI Muslimeen, main Shia political party. According to news from Gilgit-Balistan, Baba Jan is now one of the favorite candidates of the youth in his constituency.

By accepting Baba Jan nomination papers for elections, the state has in fact refuted the charges that he is a terrorist. If he wins the seat, there would be a strong pressure by the people for his and other comrade's release.

Financial support urgently needed

1. Baba Jan and his four more colleagues are still facing one life sentence. It is most importantly to help keep the mass campaign going on for the release on these climate change prisoners. The visibility of the case has to be maintained, which is not that easy because it is based in the marginalised Gilgit-Baltistan, and Pakistan is currently facing a large number of problems. Without effective campaign, the risk is that Baba Jan's case would be continuously overshadowed by other pressing issues, and pushed back.

2. Concerning the legal defense, some of the best radical lawyers of Pakistan are ready to be part of the legal team for Baba Jan and others already functioning at Gilgit level. They have agreed not to charge their regular legal fee. However, they have to travel by air to Gilgit and also some legal costs and expenditures have to be covered.

3. All of these activists come from working class back ground. Their families are dependent on them. Most of the money spend on campaign and legal and family support were raised by families friends and social and political activists. Some regular financial assistance has to be provided to the families of those in jail as long as necessary, including to contribute to keep the high moral of those still in jail intact.

The conjuncture is decisive. It is time for Baba Jan and his comrades to be definitively freed from the antiterrorist court sentence and from jail. We have to help – and we have to do it now.

To send donations

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[1] For previous articles, see <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/> the key word JAN Baba.