

Pakistan: Khan, the Movement for Justice, and the Left

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It is compellingly said that the Zionist genocide in Gaza is the moral issue of our lifetimes. That is, regardless of your strong stands on other social issues of our day – ignoring Gaza is profoundly and unacceptably immoral. This is why, in the United States, a large chunk of the Democratic Party base is turning towards the Green Party. While the Democratic Party and its most recent presidential candidate, Kamala Harris, may have some semi-progressive views on certain domestic issues, the fact that the Party establishment is silent, nay complicit, in the Israeli genocide is the red line that the Party has crossed.

In a similar vein, arguably the moral issue today for the people of Pakistan is a new phase of extreme barbarism of the national security state in Islamabad.

In the US, this has been an ‘unmasking’ moment of elite American institutions such as the universities, the corporations, and, of course, the Biden administration. In order to please the Zionist billionaire class, these power centers have dispensed with any pretense of commitment to liberal values such as freedom of speech and the right to peacefully protest. Similarly, whatever shred of a democratic facade the Pakistani military-civilian regime has tried to sell to the world, has been replaced by a ‘gloves off’ brutal repression of even an iota of democratic expression.

The most egregious of the state actions took place last week against Pakistani parliamentarians of the ‘Movement for Justice’ (MFJ/PTI), who were manhandled, detained, and disappeared by the security state. Unable to eradicate the most popular political tendency by far in the country, the generals have removed any mask of restraint and instead are now, once again, engaging in unashamed state terror, this time directed toward the democratically-elected ‘troublemakers.’

The resurgence of mass protests of the MFJ are led by those who remain uncompromisingly resolute in their struggle against the military establishment and its kleptocratic friends in the political class. Most of these protestors are critical – not blind – supporters of jailed former Prime Minister Imran Khan, which places them in good company with 75% of Pakistan’s population.

However, what has been most unfortunate is that the ideological section of society that one would expect to be at the forefront of solidarity and struggle at this moment, i.e., the Left, is nowhere to be found. The Pakistani Left admirably organizes around labor issues, but doesn’t see ordinary MFJ workers as a part of the struggle. The Left commendably advances women’s rights, though does not consider the thousands of MFJ women horribly abused and

jailed as a part of that endeavor. The Left impressively opposes state repression against political expression in provinces such as Balochistan, but becomes somewhat reticent about the repression of anyone having anything to do with the MFJ or Khan.

A constant refrain reiterated by sections of the Pakistani Left is that these people resisting and being repressed – especially those from the dominant province of Punjab – never condemned the horrendous state violence meted out to the people of Balochistan. It is correctly pointed out that the Baloch people, like those in former East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), have been victims of unrelenting exploitation, routine disappearances, torture, and cold-blooded murder.

This accusation by the Left, not necessarily against all but definitely many in the current mobilizations, has legitimacy. But it is sadly far too frequently deployed to avoid serious and committed solidarity and support for victims of the most recent manifestation of the Pakistani state's campaign of mass terror. For principled progressives, this seems to be a grave ethical and strategic blunder.

The ethical component of such politics is rooted in how we approach the question of solidarity. We can invoke innumerable examples of solidarity that clarify this issue. The most recent example is the US-Israeli genocide in Gaza. The constant demand of anyone in solidarity with the Palestinians is to first condemn Hamas, and then these apologists of genocide may *possibly* bewiling to hear what they have to say. The global Left, for the most part, finds this logic utterly contemptible. Whether the people of Gaza are supporters or not of Hamas is categorically irrelevant. In the face of the most savage wholesale violence in our lifetimes, much of the Left makes their solidarity with Palestinians unconditional.

Similarly, since the 7th of October 2023, the factions forming the Palestinian Authority, never having any love loss with Hamas, have stood firmly with the Islamic Resistance Movement in its armed struggle against Zionism. Quite surprisingly, even the factions of the PA that reject armed struggle have not been willing to condemn the prison revolt of Hamas/the Gazans and their military operation against Israel on Oct. 7th.

Some other cases may further illustrate this point. In Turkiye, there was an attempted military coup against President Erdogan and his AKP party in July of 2016. It probably would have succeeded had it not been for the solidarity of millions of other Turks of drastically different ideological orientations than the AKP. In some cases, many of these political parties detested Erdogan. But these oppositional political forces clearly understood that the Turkish people have been waging a decades-long struggle to rid the country of military rule and usher in a new period of democracy. Hence, they felt that at that particular moment, the moral issue at hand was to confront head-on the Turkish military establishment from once again butchering any democratic process, regardless if this would lead to the victory of a political party with whom they vehemently disagreed, the AKP.

Another well-documented instance of state savagery was that of Saddam Hussein and his particular targeting of the Kurds and the Shia. The ruthless attack on the Kurds, using chemical weapons, was one of the most heinous instances of state violence against an internal ethnic group in modern times. What was disappointing was that the majority – not all – of Iraqi Shia did not show much solidarity with the Kurds and refused to condemn what happened. However, shortly thereafter, the Shia themselves faced a sadistic, cold-blooded campaign of terror against them by Saddam. While it was definitely lamentable that not

more Shia vocalized their condemnation of what was done to the Kurds, nevertheless, no serious individuals and groups on the Left deemed the brutalized Shia unworthy of their full support and solidarity.

Closer to home, the Left may not like various Baloch political factions for a variety of reasons, including both collaboration with the state apparatus as well violent militant actions that kill civilians. Nevertheless, this correctly does not prevent general solidarity with the historically oppressed Baloch.

Hence, we can see the utter immorality, in light of some people within MFJ who have shown indifference in the past (but are now beginning to see the parallels), of making the present victims of state brutality effectively unworthy of solidarity. The most disconcerting rhetoric by some Pakistani progressives is the insinuation that it's essentially good that members of the MFJ can now feel what the Baloch have felt.

Though the moral basis of standing shoulder to shoulder with students, workers, and women of the MFJ should be self-evidently obvious, there is also the strategic question. While the Left is usually on the mark on the question of strategy, it has been regrettably amiss with regards to popular mobilizations against state barbarity over the past few years.

Indeed, is there a shadow of a doubt that the *principal* target of Pakistani state terror has been and are the MFJ/Khan supporters? Of course, that is not to deny the ongoing assault against the Baloch and the Pashtuns, and the harassment of the Left.

In this period of Pakistan's vicious crackdown, is it possible for the Left to acknowledge that there are at least some MFJ activists who are *not* part of any cult, who are *not* suffering from overbearing 'false consciousness,' and who actually might be interested in radical change and are yearning for a politics that can achieve that? One can certainly argue whether Khan or the MFJ represents a movement for such radical transformation. But it is only by engaging with people sympathetic to the MFJ and Khan can this healthy political discussion advance. These encounters would undoubtedly benefit both the existing Left as well as MFJ constituents in becoming more cognizant of how progressive politics, strategy, and vision can facilitate the latter's desired sea change in the social, political, and economic life of Pakistan. Such political engagement would immensely boost the credibility of the Left, with these discussions taking place in the real-life context of solidarity and struggle. The time-tested Marxist adage applies here, the notion that the most rapid transformation of political consciousness occurs while standing arm in arm in struggle at the barricades, fighting one form of oppression or the other together and collectively.

The Left assuming a 'vanguard' role in providing direct, militant support for those battling state tyranny would teach activist-minded young people and others what solidarity looks like in practice.

We are hopeful that the Left's former condescension towards young people involved in the MFJ, callously and mockingly calling them 'youthias' (connoting a deeply vulgar and despicable characterization in Urdu), has been expunged from their discourse today, representing a higher level of political maturity.

Thus, the moral issue of our time in contemporary Pakistan is fighting a reinvigorated violent, fascist military-intelligence apparatus on steroids. Pakistan's predicament has degenerated to such an extent that even old neocon of note, Zalmay Khalizad, is now

publicly expressing the indignation of the American foreign policy establishment. Washington planners are exasperated by the inability of the generals in Islamabad to 'manage' the situation even with the employment of massive violence against the people of Pakistan. Recently, and practically out of the wilderness, the *New York Times* has woken up and also is articulating the position of the State Department and US intelligence. The latter seem to be incensed at their thoroughly illegitimate Pakistani regime changer clients' incompetence in quashing the ongoing revolt from below.

Many Pakistanis remain optimistic and confident that the Left's denunciation of the country's new phase of totalitarianism will hopefully come before when even the US State Department would feel compelled to reprimand its minions in Islamabad. Hopefully, the Left and its indefatigable and deservedly well-respected young leaders in Pakistan recognize that, while all of the important social struggles in the country must continue, directly confronting the present oppressive regime, in solidarity with activists of the MFJ, is *the* moral issue of their time.

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