

A Letter to the Left | The Express Tribune

Abbas Moosvi June 13, 2022

In Pakistan, the religious right is a force to be reckoned with — partially because it's been propped up by the angels

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With the country flirting with economic crisis of grave proportions and ordinary people slowly awakening to the fact that there aren't (and perhaps never were) any adults in the room, a political void seems to have opened up. Could there be an alternative to the mainstream parties and men in uniform? They say luck is preparation meeting opportunity, but do progressives in Pakistan have their house in order? As someone who considers himself one, it pains me to respond in the negative. Nevertheless, relentless optimism has always animated our ranks — so in the words of Vladimir Lenin: what is to be done?

In Pakistan, the Left is characterised by scattered pockets of activity. Political workers in one party seem to be suspicious of those in another, allowing their egos to get in the way of potential unification. A twofold explanation to this could be described as follows: a) the relatively recent tendency to equate 'bad' ideas to a lack of character, and b) the general suspicion around 'empirical' analyses. Taken together, these function to constrict ideational vibrancy and healthy exchange, leading to a pathological cycle of fragmentation. This must end immediately.

Progressives can never allow a culture of self-censorship to brew internally — whereby individuals are afraid of voicing themselves in a free, open and unfiltered manner. If certain theoretical positions have been rendered obsolete, it is the responsibility of contemporary academics to outline precisely why — and to generate alternatives that are more contextual in their nature, ones which can synthesise the old with the new. The process may be kick-started through a series of internal debates among leading voices, with the end-goal simply being to generate a comprehensive manifesto that all forces in the movement can get behind to present a unified front to the public: ideally under one umbrella organisation.

This is important because unless certain principles are democratically agreed upon by Pakistan's Left, values that form the 'floor' of the overarching ideological framework, then political success is always going to remain a pipe dream. Pragmatism, the idea of not allowing ourselves to be bogged down by trivialities and being mindful of the 'bigger picture' at all times, is a noble proposition. However, in order to be sustainable across time and space, it is crucial to establish an intellectual and organisational base that the vast majority — particularly those from working class backgrounds — feel empowered by.

Donald Trump was not successful because of any earth-shattering insights he forwarded, but rather due to his ability to connect with ordinary people in a manner that felt organic and comprehensible to them. What made it possible was his barebones approach. America First. Build the wall. China's fault. Regardless of one's opinions on his politics, there is no doubt he played 'the game' well.

In Pakistan, the religious right is a force to be reckoned with — partially because it's been propped up by the angels, but also due to its strong organisation, coordination and internal discipline. Leaders address their followers in a manner that reminds them of their autonomy, that they have the power to instigate radical change. Homes visited. Gifts exchanged. Ceremonies arranged. Funds raised. Networks leveraged. On the other hand, however, a sense of struggling for a cause greater than oneself is also promoted in compelling ways — with emphasis on themes of hope, sacrifice, perseverance.

The Left must tone down on the academic jargon, speak to uplift rather than console, and adopt a politics geared around unity, discipline and sound reasoning. Progressives in Chile came into power largely by uniting under one banner, the 'Apruebo Dignidad' (Approve Dignity) coalition — which constitutes a whopping 9 parties in total. Furthermore, logic and rationality need not be monopolised by edgy 'dudebros' on the internet peddling the neoliberal ideology on the one hand and hyper-conservatives on the other who are attempting to establish linkages between science and their particular faith systems. Of course, this will naturally mean having to understand the salient thinkers of those intellectual traditions and addressing the strongest possible versions of their respective philosophies — whether cultural or economic — rather than just strawmen. We must, in the words of Ben Burgis, give them an argument.

Related to this is knowledge production and dissemination. Rather than engaging exclusively with 'allies', it is indispensable for progressives to constantly reach across the aisle and speak to folks that not only disagree with them, but may even be outright hostile. In particular, this will mean making appearances on conservative-leaning television programmes and participating in lectures, seminars and workshops at think-tanks and academic institutions linked to the establishment, government, and international financial institutions. Progressives would do well to avoid petty one-upmanship games and instead seek to offer a platform that is both welcoming and informative: a potential antidote for rampant polarisation. In the words of Antonio Gramsci, a war of position, rather than one of maneuver, must be embraced and space charted out in a forceful, creative and dynamic manner.

Finally, digital media must be enthusiastically embraced. Say it: no Luddites on the Left. Tahrir Square and Occupy Wall Street are two salient examples of just how powerful social media can be in mobilising people by making information available in real time via the bypassing of censorship. Even here, however, not all platforms are equal. Facebook has the most number of users. TikTok is largely populated by the youth, particularly from working class backgrounds. Progressives must be aware of these details and allocate their time and resources accordingly. PTI understood this better than most — and reaped the rewards. This is not to say that virtual activism can ever fill in for actual political work, but that it must have a place (perhaps even a central one) in the larger strategic structure.

Yes, speech is not free. Yes, violence is routinely deployed to weaken prospects for mobilisation. And yes, key institutions are populated by technocrats that have pledged allegiance to regressive, neocolonial ideologies that function to stifle the state apparatus. But what is politics if not the art of the possible?

A happier, greener and more equitable Pakistan is achievable, where decision-making is not outsourced to abstract authoritarian forces opportunistically pursuing political agendas but rather actively shaped via deliberation and negotiation between ordinary people themselves. That Pakistan will not, however, be handed on a silver platter. It must be taken back from the elites, both domestic and global, that have specialised in the loot and plunder of this nation. Progressives must look inward.

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