

PPP's progressive pivot? | The Express Tribune

Abbas Moosvi December 24, 2022

To what extent will the party push this on issues that have obstructed the blossoming of democracy in Pakistan

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‘Osama Bin Laden is dead, but the Butcher of Gujarat lives: and he is the Prime Minister of India.’ These were the words of Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari in a recent address to the UN Security Council. While some vociferously condemned this apparent departure from traditional diplomatic protocol, others celebrated the forthright and unapologetic dig at Narendra Modi (a reactionary populist and champion of neoliberalism) in response to Indian accusations of Pakistan housing terrorists. This took place with the backdrop of several key political moves from the PPP over the past few months, including its recent showing at COP27, the incorporation of the transgender community under BISP’s umbrella, and the liberation of student unions in Sindh. Is this a new era for the PPP?

Since the catastrophic floods this year, the PPP has tapped into high profile summits and conferences around the world to make the case for climate justice. The Foreign Minister has on several occasions emphasised that this can only be possible via financial compensation, not as aid or charity but an unequivocal acknowledgment from the international community that poor countries have been paying the consequences of the unfettered industrialisation of the developed world. It was in this spirit that Climate Minister Sherry Rehman pushed for a ‘Loss and Damage Fund’ at COP27, allowing countries, particularly from the Global South, to draw resources from in their battle against climate change.

This represents a reintroduction of power relations in climate diplomacy, which until not too long ago was based exclusively around resilience, adaptation and rehabilitation strategies that tend to overlook the root cause of the phenomenon i.e. unchecked carbon emissions from the Global North, in turn fuelled by an economic system hell bent on the pursuit of profit at any and all costs.

More broadly, the PPP has, over the course of 2022, made a series of important decisions to strengthen civil society and promote greater levels of inclusivity. The passing of the Sindh Student Unions Bill, 2019 grants the most important stakeholders in higher education the ability to once again influence decision-making and produce ideologically-oriented, critical thinkers as future political leaders. Including the transgender community into eligible beneficiaries of the Benazir Kafalat Program was another significant achievement and will offer much-needed assistance to one of the most oppressed identities in Pakistan, with Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa alone hosting 91 registered murders since 2015 and over 2,000 pending cases of violence today.

Further laudable moves in recent days were the party leadership’s push for a consolidated front against forced marriages/conversions and a statement from the Sindh High Court dismissing a petition that demanded mandatory teaching of the Qur’an at schools/colleges, which reads, “in our

view, matters of the faith are personal and are even otherwise best left to the individual”. Finally, the passing of the Sindh Protection of Human Rights (Amendment) Bill, 2022 empowers the Sindh Human Rights Commission in its dealing with business-related abuses of power in terms of upholding contractual agreements, ensuring adequate working conditions and protecting workers from abuse and harassment.

All the above has prompted certain circles to ponder whether the PPP is making an attempt to revive its Left roots. The question, however, is the extent to which the party will push this, particularly on the deeper, more pervasive political economy issues that have obstructed the blossoming of democracy in Pakistan: which it too has benefitted from. These include land relations, industrial rent seeking, predatory international financial institutions, a rogue security apparatus, devolution of power within provinces, and more — all of which are responsible for the annual elite capture of Rs2.7 trillion from the economy as per the UNDP.

It remains to be seen whether the PPP is willing to forego political capital to truly centre its activities around the concerns of ordinary citizens — but if there were ever an optimal time for a radical reorientation, now would be it.

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