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Pakistan

Fundamentalism, a challenge for the Left

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The idea of interviewing Farooq Tariq came from a lecture he gave during the Asian Global Justice School in Manila at the end of July 2012. I remember him stating firmly that Marxism is totally opposite of religion, particularly because the main basis of religion is private property, which is in line with class based society and capitalism. He also highlighted the position of LPP towards religion, that they don't discuss religion nor make jokes about it, just as they oppose using religious arguments for socialism. At the same time, Farooq also gave inspiring examples of the role of socialists to defend religious freedom in Pakistan. For my context in Indonesia, a majority Muslim country which is seeing an increase of religious intolerance and violence, this conversation was very important, especially concerning the attitude of the left. I also took the chance to ask him on the recent left collaboration project in Pakistan.

Q: There has been a growing number of Islamic fundamentalist groups threatening religious minority, women and LGBT's groups and democratic principles in Indonesia. As far as I know, no left forces take this development seriously or organise a significant response. These fundamentalist groups are growing in terms of numbers, supporters, and activities, even though the number of people who really support Islam as a political idea and agenda in general is declining as was shown by the 2009 general elections [1]. So for us the violence of fundamentalist groups, such as the Islamic Defence Front (FPI) is a new issue. Their activities are creating a new atmosphere in which we need to take them seriously. I would like to get a sense of your struggle in Pakistan as a socialist party which takes this issue very seriously.

But first, I'd like to go back to what you've raised during your lecture about the increase of fundamentalist forces in the world, particularly in South and South-East Asia after 9/11. What can you say about this?

Farooq: After 9/11 religious fundamentalism has been on the rise. All the efforts of the imperialist forces to cope with the activities of fundamentalists by military means have failed. Fundamentalism in different shapes has grown. They've grown as political forces, they've grown as very militant forces, new groups have come up, new ways of suicidal attacks have taken place not only in Pakistan and Afghanistan, but even spreading to some African countries, and Indonesia as well. And the attacks are promoted by religious fanatics as a means of resistance.

Fundamentalism as a force has to be countered on political grounds, it has to be taken very seriously. We cannot think that imperialism will do our job for us by repressing them, killing them, through their drone attacks, through their war on terror and so on. Osama Bin Laden was killed, but not his ideas, his ideas still survive. New Osama bin Ladens have come to the front, with different names and activities. Did their activities decrease after Osama's death? No. Things have even been getting worse after his death, because the death of Osama was hailed by the US as a major victory for them. The president came on the air and said that Osama's death could be an end of the fanaticism. But we have seen since 15th May 2011, Osama was killed, that the fundamentalists have not decreased their activities. They emerged in different shapes, it took little time for them to reorganise. In Pakistan there are more suicide attacks, there are more fundamentalists in different shapes, and we have seen them increase in the parliamentary field, in Egypt they are coming to power, they lost narrowly in Libya, they gained good results in Algeria, Tunisia. So you can see the progress they are making, also in Indonesia. The growth of fundamentalism has to be taken very seriously by the left.

I can tell you that we had a long debate in our party in 1998-1999 and 2000. There were debates on the growth of fundamentalism. We had two trends, one trend in the party was saying fundamentalism growth is orchestrated by imperialist forces and whenever they want, the imperialists can discard the fundamentalists. Fundamentalists, this

trend said, are promoted by imperialism, and they will always be controlled by the imperialists. This was before 9/11. I was one of the leaders in the party who said fundamentalism will progress by leaps and bounds, because of the crisis of capitalism, and because of the inability of the capitalist parties to solve any of the problems of the people. So fundamentalism would become to be seen like an alternative. I did not realise the extent to which they would go to attack America, 9/11 for instance.

It was argued by some comrades that fundamentalism was like a balloon with air inside: once you put a needle in it the balloon will burst, the air will go out and they will come to their own small size. We said no, it's not a balloon, it's a real problem, it's a real monster, brought up by imperialist forces but it has gone out of control. We said the fundamentalist would form their own movements, build their own strength. We have seen 9/11 and then in 2002 fundamentalism for the first time in Pakistan got over 50 per cent of the vote. Before, they never had more than three, four per cent. They could not beat this record 2008 because of several factors. There was the opposition from us and some of the fundamentalist forces were boycotting the elections while some were participating. So the fundamentalist forces split during the 2008 election. Paving the way to a PPP (Pakistan People Party) majority in parliament.

But it's a real phenomena we have to face it. And the left should not think it's not their problem. The left should not think someone else will handle the fundamentalists for them, the left should really take them seriously. Although they are not the main enemy, which remains the capitalist system. But you should keep an eye on this growing enemy, which is threatening mainly the weakest section of our class, like women, and religious minorities. These sections are most threatened by the growth of fundamentalism.

Q: As you said the trend of suicide attacks is raising. In Indonesia it happened, and Jamaa Islamiyah Indonesia was accused of doing this, and maybe they did, but do you know of any possible connections between the Islamic fundamentalist forces in Indonesia and Pakistan? Sometimes the government says that Indonesian fundamentalists were trained in Pakistan.

Farooq: I think religious fundamentalist groups are believers in internationalism. They want to change the world into an Islamist world, so it's not just national trends in Indonesia and Pakistan. There are different international groupings and regroupings of fundamentalist trends. There is Jemaah Islamiyah Indonesia, Jemaah Islami in Malaysia et cetera. There is also Jemaah Islami in Bangladesh. So there are different internationals, and fundamentalists are uniting on an international basis. And we have seen that a person responsible for the Bali bombing was arrested in Pakistan. One of them was recently sentenced in Indonesia to 20 years in jail, and he was arrested in Pakistan. He was arrested in the same city where Osama bin Laden was killed. So Indonesian fundamentalists have long standing contacts with Pakistan fundamentalists and that has to be exposed by left forces. Al Qaeda is not a national organisation. Their becoming more dangerous because they have an international, political agenda, agenda to take over the world. Indonesia is one of the countries where an absolute majority is muslim. You can see from different aspects of life that fundamentalists are gathering support.

More moderate groups are paving the way for hard line fundamentalists. And that's a very dangerous trend in Indonesia, and I think Indonesian socialists must take that phenomena seriously.

Q: What can you say on the connection between the military and fundamentalist religious groups in Pakistan? In Indonesia, there is a history of such cooperation, but sometimes leftists simplify the phenomenon of fundamentalism as being just an invention of the military.

Farooq: Whenever the fundamentalists are growing, this explained by some of the left groups as the hidden work of the Americans or of the military, the ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence Pakistan). In this view, the fundamentalists are only the running dogs of the military. To some extent it was true at one time, but now they are a real force, a political

force. They are an established force, they have the sympathy of the majority of Muslims in Pakistan, they are being seen as anti-imperialist. It is the idea of religious fundamentalism which has regarded the sympathy by many Muslims, because after 9/11 the policies of US have been paving the way for this. For Muslims all over the world life became much harder.

One thing which is true for Pakistan and I think also true for Indonesia that most of the forces of fundamentalists come from people who left the country. These fundamentalist groups collect a lot of money from the west, whenever the leader goes to the west he comes back with a bag full of money. Immigrants in the west feel the pressure of racism, identify stronger as a religious group and think they are contributing to a good cause in their own country. So the tough life of the ordinary Muslims, the lack of alternatives from the bourgeois parties paved the way for the growth of religious fundamentalism. In Pakistan they have become very rich.

Q: Some people on the left who argue that fundamentalists are also part of the working class because most of them come from the poorer sections of society.

Farooq: I've heard this argument several times, claiming they are from the working class. It's a working class movement, and that we must be for them, we must join them in order to expose the idea of fundamentalism, the class basis of fundamentalism is a reason for the left to go with them and so on. I think these are all wrong notions. The class composition of religious fundamentalism is mainly middle class, upper middle class and it's not a class-based movement, it's a religious based movement. They want Muslims to join, they don't want workers to join them. They don't want any sort of class contradiction within their own ranks. In Pakistan these mistaken ideas are often promoted by some left groups who say that the Pashtun working class has gone to the Taliban and all that, but I think it's wrong and also in Indonesia. Thinking that because of the class nature of the fundamentalist we should have a very different attitude, even be positive towards them and that we should try to work with them is a mistake; it would mean a complete collapse of the left if the left went along with the fundamentalist groups.

I know the case of Dita Sari very well, we had a debate with her urging her not to be elected on the list of an Islamic party [2], even though that party was not a fundamentalist party, just a religious party. There's a very thin line between religious parties and fundamentalist parties. Because religious parties are the basis for fundamentalist parties, they are the home ground on which fundamentalists can play easily. The rest of the leadership PRD (People's Democratic Party-Indonesia) chose the wrong strategy of working with this religious party. I had a debate with Dita Sari in 2007 on this issue but she thought they could enter parliament and do anything they wanted. And I asked; 'what parliament?' This parliament will not really help your party to grow, it's only the class struggle, it's only the struggle on the street, the mass movement, people's struggle, the struggle against fundamentalism that will pave the way for the success of PRD. And now we see the total collapse of that party, very unfortunate. I had a lot of respect for Dita Sari and her sacrifice, and the whole party was really like a shining example for the parties in Asia who fought against dictatorship, who fought for workers rights. PRD was the example of the kind of party that we wanted to build in Pakistan. When we started the LPP we always had this idea of PRD, who can grow and make sacrifices. And when Soeharto was defeated we hoped this party would grow tremendously, and it happened to some degree, the PRD did grow and attract a lot of people. But unfortunately wrong choices can mean disaster. It was a crime, of the PRD leadership [3]. But I think even ignoring fundamentalism is also a crime. If you take them lightly, you will pay the price in the future.

Q: About the campaign against fundamentalism. Tell me about the experience of Labour Party Pakistan in the solidarity campaign for the Mayor of Punjab and for a converted Hindu woman. In Indonesia, we supported the alliance against FPI [4], support the petition against them, but no other part of the left joined this because of the different reasons we've discussed.

Farooq: We always try to unite different trends against fundamentalism. Because this fight is big we need to have

large forces to fight against them. We always try to bring together social organisations, NGOs, trade unions, political parties, in a national fight against fundamentalism. We have found a Joint Action Committee for People's Rights. It has no structure, it just a committee but it get together to act on various issues. It's a movement. At one time the LPP was considered as a NGO party because in a society which is controlled by feudalism and fundamentalism and imperialism, we need to do some social work with social organisations, and try to radicalize them. So we've been working with social organisations in this fight against fundamentalism, we always try to unite with the rest of the left, with trade unions, and various social movements.

When a Hindu woman in Sindh was forcefully converted to Islam [5], it was an LPP initiative to hold rally across Sindh [6]. So there was a rally in Hyderabad, the second largest city, and one in Karachi. But the Hyderabad rally was attacked by the Sunni Tehreek fundamentalist group [7] who said we were against the anti-blasphemy law and that marched against fundamentalism. They attacked us, we fought back. Police came in, the fundamentalists got together, and all of our comrades, around a hundred, were arrested. And this is just against the case of a poor Hindu woman who was forcefully converted to Islam. We are in favor of free choice but knew that this was forced on this woman.

And after 8 hours of detention our comrades were released from prison, and the fundamentalist failed making a case against us based on the anti-blasphemy law. The penalty for blasphemy in Pakistan is the death sentence. So that is one example of our strategy, we never compromise in defending the minorities in Pakistan which are mainly Hindu and Christian. It is our main task as socialists to defend the most downtrodden, and the minorities are among the most downtrodden.

Another case in Punjab last year was the killing of the governor of Punjab. [8]. Punjab is the largest province of Pakistan. The governor was from PPP, Pakistan People Party, he sympathized with a Christian woman who was arrested and charged with blasphemy. He went to jail to meet her, he spoke to the press in favor of this woman. Fundamentalist said he had committed blasphemy by supporting the woman who was accused of making blasphemous comments. He was a liberal bourgeois who dared to defend this woman. And what happened to him? His own bodyguard, who was influenced by the fundamentalists, killed him. And People's Party, his party, refused to defend his memory because they don't want to take the fundamentalists, they want to close their eyes, they just kept quiet. So we took the initiative to organise a first condemnation, a popular condemnation. We said we will light candles in front of the governor's house [9] And thousands of people came to pay tribute. We had a lot of problems with this governor politically, but when we fight against fundamentalism we have to be united with the liberals... We must be together, we have to be very flexible in our tactics and adept to the situation. We should be flexible on tactics and firm, on principles. It's good that the family of the governor was quite happy with the initiative taken by LPP at that time.

Q: You said other parts of the left are also involved in the campaign against fundamentalism, it's not only your party. I'd like to know more about the latest left unity project in Pakistan.

Farooq: Since we established the party in 1997 we always tried to work with different left currents in Pakistan. Although we came from a Trotskyist background, we will not build a party which is a Trotskyist party. We want a Marxist party, a socialist party. So we took very an ordinary name: the Labour Party. And the idea behind this name was that it should be a class based party, and it should attract different trends, people from different backgrounds, and they should unite on forming the party, but at the same time they can disagree on historical questions. Because after the collapse of stalinism and the offensive of capitalism after 1990s, the division among the left has become less important. It's not the same situation as before 1990. I remember a lot of sectarian attitudes we also had at that time. Also because the offensive of capitalism the left is threatened, so it must unite. And I think in a country like Pakistan, the ideas of Trotsky, the theory of Permanent Revolution won over many stalinists because it opposes alliances with the bourgeoisie. It argues against the stages theory of revolution, and that the bourgeoisie cannot repeat the historical role it had in the European democratic political revolution. The bourgeoisie cannot end

imperialism, it cannot bring democracy or cannot unite the nation, neither can, they separate the state from religion or stimulate industrialization.

So we have been working together with different parties and groups, we always try to unite. In 2006 we found the Awami Jamhoori Tareek (AJT) [10], I was secretary of that, with all seven left groups of Pakistan, and we organised very succesfull events. But it did not go very far because of the sectarian attitudes of some of the groups. But still, we were together in the lawyer's movement, we were united in our fight against fundamentalism. Last year a discussion started of how to merge started between three parties: Labor Party, Workers Party and the Awami Party of Pakistan. All these parties have found their own merger committees. Labor Party also found a merger committee, in the last federal committee meeting held in Aktabaad, the city where Osama bin Laden was killed. We insisted that the unity of the left has to be on the basis of a socialist program, not on an anti-capitalist program. Anti-capitalism is not sufficient. So our argumentation succesfully won and the other two parties agreed on this . It's scientific socialism that we are talking about and democratic centralism, leninist method of organisation and so on...

In August the talks will continue on organisational terms and then we'll go back to our own party. If the negotiation comes to a conclusion and we have an agreement, then there will be a special federal committee meeting of the LPP. We dont want to take such a decision in a hurry, we have to be sure. Once you've merge, that's your party. And we experienced 20 years of problems in such projects, so we also need to learn from other experiences, both negative and positive.

An united left party in Pakistan would attract lot of radicalized youth. At this time there is a lot of confusion about which party they should join, since all these different left parties are there. And they ask: what differences do you have? I hope that it will be a great step forward for the progress of left ideas if the merger negotiation succeed and the parties agree. If we are able to form one big party of the left, it will have potential to grow and will possibly win some seats in the parliament as well.

This interview was first published on the English-language blog of the People's Liberation party Indonesia [Partai Pembebasan Rakyat](#).

[1] [Indonesia's Islamic parties in decline](#).

[2] See [Indonesia: Union militant to contest elections](#) and [The Indonesian left and Green Left Weekly](#).

[3] [For some background on this issue: [Our Stance](#).

[4] [No love shown to the FPI](#) and [Anti-FPI Movement Threatens Indonesia's National Police With Lawsuit](#).

[5] [Hindu girl tells Supreme Court she would rather die than convert to Islam](#).

[6] [Hyderabad \(Pakistan\): Left rally against forced religious conversion attacked by Sunni Tehreek](#).

[7] [Hyderabad \(Pakistan\): Left rally against forced religious conversion attacked by Sunni Tehreek](#).

[8] [Punjab Governor Salman Taseer assassinated in Islamabad](#).

[9] [A commemoration for the slain governor of Punjab/](#).

[10] [Awami Jamhoori Forum \(National Leftist Forum\)](#).