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**Pakistan**

# **Struggling under the flag of solidarity, facing repression, in a fractured country**

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**The student mobilization on 29 November 2019 had a deep echo across Pakistan. Affirming solidarity with all the discriminated and exploited sectors of society, it became a rallying point for a wide range of social and progressive movements in a country and a state undermined by numerous regional, national or religious fractures and by abysmal social inequalities.**

This is why repression strikes severely. Activists prosecuted for “sedition” have avoided immediate imprisonment by paying bail. [1] But they must appear again in court on 7 January to find out if their bail will be maintained. This is very important as the charge of sedition is particularly serious.

The demonstrations of 29 November deserved their name - Solidarity Marches - tackling all injustices, even the most politically or socially “sensitive” such as the rights of minority populations, the status of women or transgender people, the laws against blasphemy, the sometimes “feudal” (or even almost slave-like) conditions of exploitation in various economic sectors and so on. In doing so, the Marches became a rallying point for a wide range of leftist political currents and social movements.

## Convergence of resistance

As Farah Zia notes in the English-language daily *The News*, the students “were joined in the march by teachers, journalists, lawyers, old guard revolutionaries, civil society activists, working classes, political workers. All genders were represented in the inclusive crowd that the Mall has not seen in recent years. Not even in the [2009] Lawyers’ Movement. The non-Punjabi youth were conspicuous by their sizeable number. A rare occasion when the “burgers’ mingled with their public school counterparts in a public space.” [2]

Amna Chaudhry adds in another English language daily newspaper, *Dawn*:

*SAC [Student Action Committee] was adamant that the march also addresses the wider problems of privatisation, misogyny, racism and the sheer neglect of marginalised groups. As a result, mobilisation for the march did not just take place on campuses, but student organisers also engaged with labour leaders, lawyers, doctors and feminists*

*Women were encouraged to be at the forefront of the march that day; labourers were given as much importance as any other group. Student Mashal Khan “who had been killed on made-up charges of blasphemy” was honoured alongside revolutionary socialist Rosa Luxemburg. In doing so, the march consolidated the issues of the marginalised as irrevocably tied together and created a space in which all citizens could give voice to their demands (...)*

*This year, student activists sought the help of labour unions, such as the Bhatta Mazdoor Union, the Labour Education Foundation, and the All Pakistan Wapda Hydroelectric Workers Union. The transgender community, Mohiba Ahmed adds, played a huge part in organising and mobilising for the strike. Since the Student Solidarity March also opposed the increasing privatisation of public institutions, they found common ground with doctors and lawyers who have the same grievances. [3]*

## A long term preparation

The second Solidarity March has been long in preparation, says Raza Gilani, a member of the Progressive Student Collective:

*We learnt a lot from our first march. Perhaps the most valuable lesson was the importance of making connections with activists all over the country. We spent the past year travelling and building these connections, and that is why the march this year was such a success. The organisers claim their inspiration is the 1968 movement against the dictatorial regime of Ayub Khan. "It is the workers, peasants, students and women who will lead the movement, just like last time. All these groups have to come together for us to be able to achieve our goals(...).*

*The movement is also criticised because there are women at the forefront," adds Ahmed. "But women are suffering the most at the hands of universities. Campuses are not safe for them, the lack of scholarships and hostel facilities affect them even more and that is why they are at the frontlines today," she says. "Women have to be a part of this, as does the transgender community. We want these people to come together, for this to be an intersectional movement. [4]*

## The accusation of sedition

The Marches on November 29 were therefore not a flash in the pan, but the expression of the ripening of a new activist and united generation determined to articulate resistance to all injustices from a progressive perspective. The ruling political circles and the various fractions of the state apparatus are not responding uniformly to this challenge. But it is clear that at least one wing of the law enforcement agency wants to strike very hard. Hence the accusation of sedition.

As in many other countries - starting with Modi's India, seen as the sworn enemy of Pakistan! - the accusation of sedition, terrorism or endangering national security is frequently used to suppress political opposition and social movements. The army has sometimes planted false evidence in the homes of peasant or worker leaders to have them sentenced to particularly harsh conditions of imprisonment (torture, solitary confinement and so on): namely Indian rupees. One of the most serious charges in this country, along with blasphemy – is being denounced as a "paid agent of India". The accusation of terrorism allows activists to be tried under emergency legislation.

The right of self-determination is obviously not recognized, and, in the face of central state oppression, irredentist movements exist, as in Baluchistan. However, the military, to cover up its own crimes, can accuse peaceful, unarmed movements, which do not jeopardize the unity of Pakistan, of threatening national security. as was the case with the Pashtun Tahfuz Movement (PTM), in the north-west of the country. Following violent repression, soldiers imprisoned the two members of the National Assembly elected in this region: Ali Wazir and Moshin Dawar. It was only after an intense mobilization in Pakistan and a major international solidarity campaign that they were released on bail.

## Sedition, terrorism and blasphemy

The charges of sedition or terrorism and blasphemy operate according to different methods, but both operate both within the framework of (legal) institutions and outside of them. For example, intelligence services can "disappear" people deemed to be overly critical (such as bloggers) – and the justice system can force them to "reappear". The state apparatus (in the broad sense) is not homogeneous. Courts of law are often subject to established powers

(ultimately intractable, as in the case of Baba Jan at Gilgit Baltistan, whatever the improbability of the accusation). They can also take very courageous positions, as when the judges of a Supreme Court declared the Christian villager Asia Bibi innocent of the crime of blasphemy for which she had been condemned to death. The great democratic defence campaigns in Pakistan are carried out by means of mobilization, but also at the legal level. Thus, many lawyers and human rights defenders will support the so-called "leaders" of 29 November, accused of sedition, on 7 January 2020.

In the case of blasphemy, extremist religious movements do not hesitate to exercise expeditious "justice" themselves. No person in detention and condemned to death for blasphemy has been legally executed to date - on the other hand, they can be murdered in the prison - or outside, if they are released (once exonerated, Asia Bibi had to be secretly taken to Canada to be saved). Many more are killed before they are even arrested.

Radical Islamists do more: they assassinate lawyers and figures who defend "blasphemers" or who criticize the extension of blasphemy laws. Salman Taseer, governor of the main province of Pakistan and a member of the government party at the time, was shot by his own bodyguard because he had defended Asia Bibi.

Most recently, a recognized academic specialist in English literature, Junaid Hafeez, arrested in 2013, was sentenced to death for blasphemy, without any proof whatsoever. The real reason is probably that he invited a feminist colleague to speak at his seminar. He has remained in solitary confinement for six years and his mental health is suffering painfully. The group of fundamentalist lawyers (there are many) pleading for the charge have threatened to kill their colleague who defends Hafeez - while his previous lawyer, Rashid Rehman, had already been attacked in his office and murdered in 2014. Religious extremists have threatened judges with the same fate if they did not sentence the accused to death, which they have done. As a rule, the perpetrators of these religious crimes are not worried. Impunity reigns and the pressure on the judicial authorities continues to increase.

## A battle on multiple fronts

This (incomplete) overview allows us to understand both the depth and the driving forces of the current student and popular mobilization (in response to so many injustices) and the challenges facing the new activist generation. It has had to engage battle on multiple fronts from the start to be able to bring together the living forces of the resistance and reconnect the thread of a historic, progressive struggle, which dates back at least to the 1968 years, and lay the foundations for 'a new left-wing force, rejuvenated, socially rooted and inclusive.

7 January represents a very important legal and political deadline. As a first step, the situation in Pakistan should be made more widely known, so as to once again ensure our solidarity with those who are pursuing a difficult struggle in this country.

PS:

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[1] The police had to admit that they had not completed their investigations.

[2] *The News on Sunday*, 8 December 2019 [“The march and after”](#).

[3] Amna Chaudry, *Dawn*, 8 December 2019 [“The Student Solidarity March called for justice, not only on campuses but for all marginalised segments of society”](#).

[4] Amna Chaudry, op. cit.