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Pakistan

Why we left the Awami Workers Party. Lessons to be learned

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Farooq Tariq and other former members of the LPP (Labour Party Pakistan) issued this statement on 5 January 2020.

When we left AWP in end of August 2019, we did not explain why. We wanted to establish a good healthy tradition of quitting the party without hurling accusations. This was to avoid an antagonistic atmosphere that could emerge after our departure. We wanted to promote a healthy discourse of debate in future.

However our departure was not without serious differences within the top leadership on programme, strategies and actions that were needed to build the party's mass base.

One of the senior AWP leaders commented several times to me that "The AWP has become the graveyard of Left groups and parties." This was exactly the poisonous atmosphere that existed at the time of our departure. The truth is that we departed when we had exhausted all avenues to change the leadership's perspectives.

It was a hard decision to leave a party we did our best to build for seven years. But the reality is that more than 80 percent our time was on discussing internal conflicts, with wrangling, accusations and counter accusations. This waste of time and energy deflated the revolutionary spirit necessary to build a genuine Marxist party in Pakistan.

Almost every meeting of the federal and executive committees was not spent on developing perspectives and strategies for party building but on trying to resolve differences through compromise. Rather than accepting the reality that there are different trends and strategies for party building, committees were formed to sort out the differences. Additionally, the main idea was that internal differences should not be made public.

Beginning Problems

In November 2012, three Left political parties merged into the Awami Workers Party. Unlike the other two parties, Labour Party Pakistan (LPP) did not insist that part of our name be used to construct the new organization's name. Since this was important for both the Awami Party and the Workers Party, the new name was the Awami Workers Party.

Before the AWP founding conference in November 2012, on 10/11 November, the LPP voted to dissolve in order to merge into the new party. At that time several LPP comrades opposed the merger and they did not join the AWP. They argued that the leadership of the other two parties would not facilitate what was necessary the development of a young and energetic leadership.

The process of merging took no more than six months. While merger committees of the three parties met several times, there was no joint membership meeting before the merger.

Why the haste? At that time it was a tense political situation. Fundamentalism was on the rise and the Left was feeling isolated. It was a defensive effort to keep the Left alive.

However, it was like an arranged marriage: Parents have met each other, but those who are to marry only developed a superficial liking for each other. They had not been tested by the problems a married couple face. In that sense the merger was a political gamble.

A history of merging

One of the AWP components, the Workers Party Pakistan, had developed out of both successful and unsuccessful mergers.

Although, the party had the most well-known Left Pakistani leaders, they had no reasonable base in any part of the country. Most of the activists were steeped in a pro-Soviet Union perspective.

Since the collapse of former Soviet Union, they had undergone a series of mergers. In 1972 they were the Pakistan Socialist Party but over the years they became the Workers Party, the Awami Jamhuri Party, the National Workers Party and finally the Workers Party Pakistan. In fact, one could say that their hallmark was in their capacity to merge and take on a new name.

The third component, the Awami Party, was a new formation that developed out of the merger of two parties just a year earlier. The Awami Party had also some former Maoist and Communist Party members and supporters.

Participation in general elections

Within a few months the first serious debate was over participation in the 2013 general elections.

Since its existence, the Workers Party, had never seriously contested a general election. It might run one or two candidates during the elections of 1988, 1990, 1993, 1997 and 2002 but boycotted the 2008 general election.

In 2013, the AWP leaders from the former Workers Party wanted a strict criteria for our candidates. The argument was that we were not ready for general elections. However those from the LPP and AP wanted a larger pool of candidates. As a result of this difference when the elections were announced, it was the former LPP and AP activists who were prepared to run as AWP candidates. The former WPP leaders sat out the race. And while the AWP candidates didn't win, many obtained reasonable votes in some constituencies. It was a starting point.

But some activists left the AWP after the elections over this conflict, including the federal senior vice president and president of AWP Punjab. Most were from the former Awami Party; they joined the National Party.

Before the first congress

As the first congress of AWP was announced for September 2014, and the process of district and provincial congresses got underway, former Workers Party activists maneuvered to take over the party organisation. "The control of the party" seemed to be their main priority.

Following the congress, it was obvious that former LPP activists were excluded in several districts in a conscious effort by former WPP comrades.

It seems that the former WPP strategy was to build their own group through mergers. They never disbanded their internal structure. They would hold secret meetings before the AWP meeting. Only selected members of their group or people likely to join them were invited. The result was often manifested in the AWP meeting, where their spokespeople would present a strategy and the rest would motivate it in a parrot-like manner.

Illusions in developing capitalism

There was not only organisational difference but profound political differences that had emerged during the course of interacting each other on the issue of capitalism and China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

The majority of leadership of AWP saw CPEC as an opportunity to develop capitalism in Pakistan through "Communist China". When we opposed this illusion, it issued a compromising confused joint statement was issued on CPEC, which was neither support nor oppose.

One of the most negative aspects of the former WPP was the way they appeased the establishment by not supporting movements and initiatives that would expose the nature of capitalism, its use of feudal relations or the militarisation of society. In essence they sought for a regulated capitalism capitalism with a human face. This form of capitalism would guarantee workers' and peasants' rights.

National question was another area where we had profound political difference in approaches to solve the issue and to lend support to national struggle of the oppressed nationalities. One of main characteristic of former Labour Party Pakistan was to lend political action oriented support from Punjab to the national struggle for equal distribution of state resources and rights. This was a missing point of AWP years.

When Zarb Azab, the military operation, was launched in June 2014, only 3 out of 43, in the federal committee opposed the military operation in Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). All the others either supported it or remained silent. This revealed the complete bankruptcy of a Left party which could not see that a military operation cannot end religious fundamentalism or terrorism. But the majority accepted a military operation because they saw no other alternative to eliminating religious fundamentalism. We were leading the arguments against the military operation.

Opposition to building movements

When we raised the need for party support to the campaign to release imprisoned Baba Jan, to support the Okara peasant movement, the missing persons campaign, the Pushtun Tahafaz Movement, the Labour Qaumi Movement Faisalabad, or the students campaign against state cuts in education, the former WPP raised questions. They might criticize its leaders, target a campaign as sponsored by an NGO or invent a "conspiracy theory" in order to keep the AWP from these campaigns.

Feminism was another controversial issue within the party. For those from the WPP, only class and party would solve the issue of women oppression. They saw feminism as a Western idea. It was a long and hard-fought struggle of

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some women comrades with very vocal support by us to establish an "independent" women organization, Women Democratic Front. It was a two-year struggle!

Interestingly, the leaders of the former WPP preferred the women in their grouping to organize their own women's activity rather than participate in the broader Women's Marches.

Later, when the leaders of Women Democratic Front wrote an excellent AWP internal policy document on sexual violence and harassment, this was opposed by almost all the leaders of former WPP. They therefore missed a chance to become the first political party in the region to have an internal policy document against incidents of sexual violence. Despite our support, the document was withdrawn for the sake of unity.

In the case of developing mass organizations, the AWP's federal committee was interested in whether they could be "controlled" by the party's members. This was the case in relation to the work among women, youth, peasants and workers.

The former WPP leaders made a sharp division from what they perceived a counter revolutionary period from a pre-revolutionary period. They maintained the strategy must be vastly different. But that seemed to be an excuse to do nothing. Their advice was "You have to be careful, you are better off not in jail; we are not in hurry, the revolution is not coming tomorrow."

Comrade Farooq Tariq was issued a notice by the party leadership in 2015, when he participated in a small demonstration in Lahore, protesting Professor Riaz's abduction in Karachi. After a strong internal protest, the notice was withdrawn. This was a case where there was clearly an agreed-upon principle opposing abduction. Nonetheless any specific initiative could be denounced as making a decision without consultation.

"Each and every aspect of political life of the party must be controlled" was the main philosophy of the WPP leadership. They even objected to an article of comrade Farooq Tariq on the history of Pakistani Left. For them, history must be written according to their political line. Critical thinking was not tolerated at top level

There is a long list of these conflicts. We were sick and tired of spending time on internal conflicts where leaders were unable to learn from one another and create a team.

By 2017, most of our youth leaders had left the party. They were targeted because they wanted to build the movements and were engaged with them. They did excellent work publicly, after leaving the party, with our public support. This then became another bone of contention.

So we resolved to say goodbye to the AWP and spend our energies in building new initiatives and movements. With our active support, we have been able to build a youth movement not seen in decade all over Pakistan. The 29th November Students Solidarity March all over Pakistan is just one manifestation of our successful initiatives.

Now what to do?

Since leaving the AWP, we have been engaged in building and strengthening left-wing movements and groups.

What sort of party or group we should build in the present objective realities of this counter-revolutionary period? The

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right versus right has become a reality of Pakistan politics.

We know we need a party/ movement that is anti-capitalist/anti-feudalist/anti-religious fundamentalist/ anti-imperialist and anti-military establishment. We know what we are against, but the question is what is our alternative vision.

We need a party that is socialist/radical feminist/environmentalist. A party that is putting independent movements and class ahead of our party. A party that strives to go along with the defence and strengthening of the most exploited section of the working class. A party that out to build labour and youth movements through their trade unions and students unions. We are in favour of a party that goes all out to support religious minorities by campaigning against discriminatory laws and practices.

At present, a wave of left-wing ideas has been promoted by our conspicuous effort during the last few years by building and strengthening the youth movement through various initiatives and activities. We have also organised successful Faiz Amn Mela's and Jalib Awami Mela's during past few years where thousands participate to pay tribute to these two revolutionary poets and vows to fight against capitalist dominated system for a Socialist Pakistan. This was done through building left-wing unity. That we will continue as we keep developing our perspectives.

Farooq Tariq and former comrades of LPP

We issued the following statement on 30th September 2019, while leaving the party:

"We are quitting AWP

Farooq Tariq

Capitalist exploitation in Pakistan is assuming alarming proportions. Democratic spaces are shrinking. The state is increasingly becoming oppressive towards social movements and working class organisations.

Simultaneously, trends of revolutionary resistance have also emerged. A growing revolutionary consciousness among the students is, in particular, noticeable. Oppressed nationalities are fighting back to assert their rights through new formations and social movements.

Likewise, trade unions, peasant bodies, and class-based projects have the capacity to launch important struggles. Climate movement, like rest of the world, has entered in an unprecedented manner an entire new generation of students.

The consciousness among youth, workers, women and other oppressed sections of the society is such that the ruling class hegemony is being challenged on a daily basis.

Back in 2012, when the Labour Party Pakistan merged with two other left-wing organisations to launch Awami Workers Party (AWP), the move was guided by a defensive strategy. The aim was to survive and to weather the storm as 'left'. We have been rather successful in achieving that target.

Women and youth played a pivotal role in making this strategy work. We prioritised and will continue to prioritise joint actions with the youth and women movements. We will also endeavour to orientate these movements towards revolutionary methods.

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In order to catalyse people's movements, re-vitalise our struggle for the release of jailed activists and comrades, to play the role of a vanguard, initiate new movements for the right to free education, healthcare and the right to a decent job, above all, to build a revolutionary party, we are quitting the AWP with a heavy heart.

We are quitting AWP, however, we are not abandoning our revolutionary ideals. Our revolutionary journey spans over 50 years. Beginning at historic Peasant Conference at Toba Tek Singh in 1970, this struggle was organisationally shaped by the experience of Struggle Group formed in 1980 at Amsterdam by leftwing exiles. This struggle will go on albeit it will take another turn. We refuse to give up.

We are leaving AWP with revolutionary wishes for our comrades. The AWP provided us an opportunity to work with such great leftist comrades as the late Fanoos Gujjar and Abid Hassan Manto. Their comradeship is a revolutionary asset for us.

We now want to move on. A new generation of progressive activists and a whole new cadre wants us to take next steps. For our future course of action, a Committee for a Revolutionary Socialist Party is being launched. The party we want to form would be part and parcel of the efforts to build revolutionary parties internationally.

Meantime, the daily Jeddojehad Online (Daily Struggle) and fortnightly Tabqati Jeddojehad (Class Struggle) continue to mirror our proud struggle against capitalism, feudalism, and imperialist exploitation. The future is socialist.

The hope lies in the instances of youth that have organised itself in Lahore on the platform of People's Rights Movement (HKM) or students mobilised from the platform of Progressive Students Collective.

In league with such youth and student projects, we will organise a country-wide new party.

For the launch of such a party, we will seek your help, guidance and moral support."

PS:

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