

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3323>



Pakistan:

Of heroes and villains

- IV Online magazine - 2014 - IV470 - March 2014 -

Publication date: Friday 21 March 2014

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Some 33 years ago, at the height of Gen Ziaul Haq's terror, three professors teaching at Quaid-i-Azam University were arrested for 'subversion' against the military government. The first of the three to be picked up from the campus premises was a computer science PhD in his late 20s by the name of Jamil Omar. His crime: the distribution of a newsletter entitled Jamhoori Pakistan.

Omar and his 'accomplices' spent the rest of the Zia years in the infamous Lahore Fort and other jails across the country. They were tortured, denied due process and slandered as enemies of Pakistan and Islam. There were thousands more like them, and more than three decades later we still await justice for the innumerable victims of the most brutal dictatorship in Pakistan's history.

Earlier this week Prof Jamil Omar passed away in Lahore, barely 60 years old. No heroic obituaries were published in major Pakistani dailies and none of our ubiquitous talk-show hosts dedicated a programme to his and his comrades' sacrifices. These 'villains' never received any tamghas or sitaras. They remain largely anonymous, even in death.

Of course, it all makes perfect sense. Leftist radicals who have spent their lives trying to foment progressive social change in this country have always been criminalised. At best they have been co-opted after death, made into apolitical symbols of state nationalism, the very same straw men these radicals spent their lives challenging. Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Habib Jalib are the most prominent examples.

Meanwhile, rightist radicals are unqualified heroes both in life and death. They are depicted as paragons of justice and morality, the most principled defenders of the land of the pure. Absurdly, their unapologetic commitment to ideologies of hate guarantees them elevated social status and a permanent audience with the powers-that-be.

Things have changed, to an extent. The fact that I am writing this piece is evidence of this. Yet it would be naïve to assume that the state and its ideologues in the media, educational institutions, religious establishment and elsewhere in society are any more tolerant of dissident views than in the past. Leftist radicals neither pose the kind of threat nor face the same brutality they did when arch-conservatives like Reagan, Thatcher and Zia set the terms of the political debate. Overt repression like in the 1980s is therefore uncommon.

Let us also not ignore the tremendous ideological contradictions within which the Pakistani state has managed to wrangle itself. During the Zia years, the mujahideen were still the world's most loved freedom fighters and the forces of 'Islam' and the 'West' on the same side in a holy crusade of the 'ahl-i-kitab' against godless communists. As we know, the contemporary situation is less rosy for previously united and hegemonic rightists.

It is no longer possible to reject the 'democracy' for which tens of thousands of progressives have made countless sacrifices. Ayub Khan insisted that democratic norms were incompatible with our climate and societal ethos while Zia insisted that the imperative of Islamisation trumped democracy and just about everything else. Present-day rulers cannot get away with such hogwash, no matter how much they may harbour anti-democratic sentiments.

Certainly leftist radicals might even have been tolerated in the past if their vision of democracy was not such a departure from what is accepted in the liberal mainstream. It was, and is, the fact that the left talks of democracy not in the formal legal and political sense but in terms of socialising the means of production and eliminating age-old

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social hierarchies that make its agenda so abominable to state and capital.

Notwithstanding contemporary political correctness, there is no reason to believe that there will never again be large-scale state repression against leftist radicals, whether in this country or elsewhere. Of course, a great deal depends on the extent to which the left maintains a commitment to a revolutionary as opposed to a reformist programme, and whether or not it is able to muster the organic bases of support necessary to make such a programme practicable.

Regardless of what happens in the future, we must not forget our past. Today pro-establishment intellectuals, media persons and politicians present themselves as defenders of democracy.

Only yesterday they were hand-in-glove with the self-proclaimed guardians of Pakistan's ideological frontiers in their suppression of progressives whose dedication to the emancipation of this country's long-suffering people was, and is, second to none.

Some of them have now passed on, while others still live with the scars of tyrannical dictatorships. It is they who deserve to be called our heroes. It is they who give us reason to believe that the world can be changed.

This article first appeared in *Dawn* <http://www.dawn.com/news/1094614/of...>

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