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Pakistan

Byelection postponed due to mass support for jailed socialist

- IV Online magazine - 2016 - IV497 - June 2016 -

Publication date: Thursday 9 June 2016

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The voice from prison of Baba Jan, social activist and president of the Awami Workers Party (AWP) Gilgit-Baltistan, appears to be so frightening to the Pakistan Muslim League/Nawaz (PMLN) government of Pakistan that it is using state machinery against Baba Jan's latest election bid from prison. On May 25, the appellate Supreme Court of Gilgit-Baltistan postponed a by-election, which was supposed to be held three days later, by three weeks

The PMLN government, along with other mainstream political parties, are desperately trying to buy more time because of the massive support for Baba Jan in the by-election campaign for a seat in the assembly of the Pakistani-administered Himalayan territory of Gilgit-Baltistan.

Every section of Gilgit-Baltistan society, including youth, women, leftists and human right activists, have been part of rallies in support of Baba Jan.

Baba Jan has been in jail for more than three years on a life sentence on trumped up terrorism charges. His case was heard by a special anti-terrorism court in Gilgit, even though he has never been involved in any terrorist activities.

His only crime was to raise his voice for the compensation by the Pakistani state for the people of the Hunza valley in 2011 devastating landslides which killed many people and left hundreds of families homeless.

Earlier Baba Jan's nomination papers were challenged in appellate Supreme Court of Gilgit-Baltistan by PPP ex-candidate Zafar Iqbal on grounds that Baba Jan has been convicted by an anti-terrorism court. The judges of supreme appellate court remarked that there was no legal ground on which Baba Jan's nomination papers could be challenged. They further added that unless the suppressed aspects of Baba Jan's case are unveiled by the anti-terrorist court, the decision on his nomination papers cannot be made.

The latest court decision is highly disputed by Baba Jan supporters and other human right activists across the whole country, including leading human rights organisations in Pakistan. Socialist movements from her countries have also expressed their solidarity with the revolutionary leader Baba Jan who has become a global symbol of struggle for human rights.

The PMLN government's desperate election campaign includes cheap vote-buying tactics such as the announcement of special development packages in Gilgit-Baltistan by the prime minister is a serious violation of the electoral code of conduct. In spite of all this, the election commission has not taken any action against the ruling party.

Despite the PMLN's use of state machinery against Baba Jan, the moral, social and political victory that he has already won, is a big slap in the government's face.

May 31

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