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Pakistan

Regime arrests democrats

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During March 2001, several leading comrades from Labour Party Pakistan were arrested by the military regime of General Pervaiz Musharaf. They were among many hundreds of other political parties who wanted to hold a rally on 23rd of March in Lahore. Most of arrests were made before the rally and political activists were picked up from their house early in the morning.

The main leadership of Alliance for Restoration of Democracy (ARD) including myself was arrested on 21st March from the house of a Muslim League leader while holding a meeting to finalize the arrangements of the public meeting. The ARD leadership announced that they would go ahead with meeting despite ban and arrests. They asked the component parties to go ahead for the public meeting.

On 23rd of March, the Mochi Gate ground, where the meeting was due to be held was sealed off by the police and a large contingent of state forces were deployed around the area. It was an unofficial curfew in the area around Mochi Gate. The Musharaf government was determined to not let any activist come near the public meeting place, let alone to hold the rally.

Ban defied

LPP had organized that at least 20 leading comrades should reach the venue and defy the ban by raising slogans in favor of democracy. LPP chairman Shoab Bhatti was in charge of the whole operation. He was not so for picked up by the police. All the leading comrades were eager to show that they are the best fighter for the class.

At least 10 were able to reach the venue despite several police barricades and search for every one passing through the barricades. It was 4pm already and none of the political activist from any party had arrived. All the LPP comrades were in one's and two's group. They were waiting for comrade Shoab go-ahead call. First arrests at Mochi gate were two female leaders of PPP, one secretary to Benazir Bhotto and her companion was PPP Lahore women wing president. They both were manhandled and pushed into the police van.

Then came Zafar Awan, general secretary LPP Punjab and chairman of All Pakistan Para Medical Staff Federation shouting slogans like restore democracy, no to military government and release Farooq Tariq. Several dozens of police man started beating him with wooden sticks but he did not run and stood raising slogans until he was bundled to the police van, then Tariq Shahzad, deputy editor Weekly Mazdoor Jeddojuhd did the same and received the same treatment by the police. It was then the turn of Maqbool, chairman of Lahore LPP center unit who was also arrested.

The two female comrades Nazli Javed, joint secretary LPP and Azra Shad general secretary Lahore LPP courted arrest with the same courage and slogans. They both were also arrested. Several more PPP activists also courted arrests. All the LPP comrades threw stickers in the air, which call for restoration of democracy. The Daily Dawn praised the courage of LPP comrades said only LPP and PPP workers were able to reach the venue out of over 18 political parties.

Although the government claimed next morning in the newspapers that they have successfully stopped the ARD to hold the public meeting. But the message of ARD has gone around the world that this regime is an undemocratic

government and is using repressive measures to curb those who are raising the slogans for the restoration of democracy. This first challenge of ARD since its formation on 3rd December 2000 has exposed the extremely weak social nature of the regime. The regime was terrified of the perspective that if the first ARD meeting is successful. It would lead to others to take initiatives and more defiance challenges would appear on the political scene.

By suppressing the public meeting on 23rd March, the regime is successful in temporarily delaying the mass movement under the auspicious of ARD. But it had aspects, negative and positives. It has led to a mass consciousness that the regime will be challenged by the political parties and there is no one way traffic as was the case in the past one and half year. It has also created an effective opposition platform against the regime.

It has paved the way to stop the march of the religious fundamentalists forces, which were seen as the only effective opposition to the "system". By taking this initiative, the ARD has exposed the close collaborationist policies of the religious fundamentalist forces with the regime. In showing a distant from the regime, the Jammāt-I-Islami, the main religious fundamentalist force, had to condemn the regime for suppressing the public meeting.

Media condemnation

For the first time, almost all the main stream media including Daily Jang, Nawa-i-Waqat, Pakistan, News International, Nation, Dawn and Business Recorder condemned this act of the regime in their editorial. Some of the known columnists were of the opinion that if the ARD would have been allowed to go ahead for the public meeting, they would have not been able to gather over 10,000 in the most favorable case. They were wrong in this assessment; it was exactly the same fear by the regime of mass anger that could have been shown by this public meeting. If the ARD could have been allowed to go ahead, the Mochi Gate would have seen one of the best-attended public meetings at this historic park. This is due the change of the consciousness of the mass about the regime.

The mass consciousness has traveled quit fast during the past few years. It has been engaged in testing one after next, disappointed and then coming to another conclusion due the change in the object realities. The Nawaz Government at the height of its "popularity" in 1997 begged seats amounted to two third majorities in the parliament. When Musharaf overthrew it in two and half years time by General Musharaf, it had lost almost all the mass sympathy.

The consciousness on 12th October 1999, when the regime took over, was generally of "relief" from Nawaz Government and "wait and see" for the regime. But to fulfill the conditional ties of IMF and World Bank, the Musharaf regime resorted to an unprecedented taxation and price hike of almost all the consumer products. This led to mass disillusionment towards the regime. Mass in general are not happy with regime but the period of Nawaz and Benazir government is also not easy to digest by most. So a dilemma is seen of despair and distrust alongside with anger and disappointment. In this background, the ARD movement for holding of the March 23rd rally has to be seen. The mood was changing but not to the level of defiance by the masses yet. It was always up to the political activists to show the courageous moves to lead a way of defiance. The first stage of such has passed away in favor of ARD.

Trend

Although, the majority of Muslim League Nawaz Group activists have not come to this conclusion that the defiance is necessary but there is going trend towards that. A new layer of leadership in Muslim League is emerging with its utmost heatedness towards the military regime. It defied the normal traditions of Muslim League of conciliation and

compromises with the ruling elite and offered arrests. The PPP new breed in Punjab leadership is a product of the 90s. It has not been tested in the heat of any movement. By going to the jail for the first time, this new leadership of Punjab PPP has strengthened its credentials of PPP traditions of fighting the military regimes as was the case in the past. The Awami National Party (ANP), Jamhori Watan Party is in the main of political heat in the North West Frontier Province (Pakhtoonkhawa) and Balochistan has yet to be tested during the probable future movements of ARD. LPP is a new entry and has done well. According to Ehsan Wain, the senior vice president of ANP, LPP came third among the ARD political parties to court arrests after PPP and Muslim League.

Some left intellectuals and political parties including Imran Khan of Tehrik Insaaf and Abid Hasan Minto of National Workers Party have opposed the ARD. Their argument is that it is the same old parties who are corrupt and looted the state assets. Their arguments can be summed up in this phrase "a good military coup is better than a bad democracy". For them, the "cleaning up of the mess" by the military regime is necessary before the restoration of democracy.

They are wrong in their assessment of the situation. They forgot the real purpose of the military regime to remain in power. It is not to clean up the mess of the political parties but to introduce that structural adjustment programme and neo liberal policies dictated by the international institutions by force that were not implemented by the previous civil governments successfully. The key economic policies of the present regime do not differ from the previous ones, but the difference is that it is able to introduce to some extent, as was not the case earlier.

The Nineties has seen successful civil regimes overthrown by the presidential orders and the introductions of transitional governments for three months. These three monthly governments would introduce reforms in favor of international monopolies, will hold the elections and then let the future civil governments to implement on these lines. The difference this time is that a transitional government has come to power not for three months but for three years. But the conduct of the present three yearly regimes is of no different than of those three monthly transitional governments. The ARD main component parties PPP and Muslim League are the main victims of the onslaught of the military government. They cannot wait for three years to be butchered by the regime so they had to do something. They waited a good one and half year to come to the conclusion to go onto offence. They had to wait for the change in the consciousness of the masses.

No sharing

The LPP has no sharing of its political programme with the rest of the political parties. The best options could have been a Left alliance for the overthrow of the present regime. But in the circumstances, where the remaining insignificant Left forces have been bitterly divided in its attitude towards the regime, to wait for a time where the Left could come to conclusion for a Left Alliance would have been a criminal mistake.

To get rid of the military regime is a dominant mood among the working class in Pakistan. It is also true that LPP is also an insignificant force at present with its handful of comrades to have a solo flight for the restoration of democracy. Was it a correct decision to join those parties of the rich in this alliance to which we have never given any support in the past? It was and the experience of the future events will further prove that LPP right to join this alliance. This is not to compromise with LPP revolutionary programme. The ARD unity agenda is not a minimum programme but one point that is to struggle to get rid of military regime and for the immediate general elections. Every party in ARD has its own meaning of democracy. They can fight for their ideas to win support from the mass. The LPP will propagate its own meaning of democracy and its own Socialist programme.

The struggle for the overthrow of capitalism and feudalism would be strengthened by the overthrow of the present

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military regime. Our struggle is not in stages. The struggle against the military regime for a democratic set up goes hand in hand with struggle to overthrow capitalism and feudalism. This is done by independent actions of LPP at the same time of joint struggle of ARD. LPP has nothing to loose from participation in the ARD but more to win.

The ARD will have no choice but to organize some sort of movement against the regime. Although some of the political parties while opposing the future course of actions, will take refuge in the argument that masses are not ready. It will be opposed by LPP and will be advocating a mass campaign for the overthrow of the present military regime.