

The People's Rights Movement – an Experiment in Radical Politics in Pakistan

By Asha Amirali

The purpose of this article is to introduce a new political initiative in Pakistan, the People's Rights Movement (PRM), that is attempting to address the vacuum in progressive political activity. An analysis of why this vacuum exists at all is essential when we are attempting to change it, but for lack of space and time, this article implies rather than details reasons for the current state of affairs. However, it is clear that since the fall of the Berlin wall, there has been a rapid shift towards free market ideology in many countries of the world. While this shift has been driven primarily by elites, the absence of a clear alternative model for social organization and the 'failed' Soviet experience have given birth to wide-spread disillusionment amongst the general public, thus making it possible for the neo-liberal order and its attendant value systems to gain ascendancy. In Pakistan, this crisis is particularly acute given the rapidly deteriorating socio-economic conditions of the country. At a time when poverty is increasing faster than in any other period of our history and we are entering a relatively rapid phase in the transition to a capitalist economy, resistance is at a minimum. The old social order characterized by complex caste and kin relations is breaking down and being replaced by a culture in which consumerism is gaining greater significance. Traditional livelihoods are being eroded and rural areas transformed by the introduction of new sets of relations such as contracts in place of century-old tenancy systems. Numerous changes are taking place, and in the midst of this flux, it is clear that people's abilities to exert control over their real circumstances of life and labor have been reduced to a minimum. The limited collective action mounted against these changes

centres around preserving the status-quo, i.e. fighting to keep the state or private capital from encroaching any further on rights and privileges already held. There are no organized demands for transformative change emanating from any section of society, particularly the intelligentsia, which has historically always helped in performing the latter task.

As stated above, this is partly in keeping with a global depression in political activity. There are also specific conditions which contribute to this crisis, most importantly the army's persistent hold on power and the withering away of leftist political formations in Pakistan. Upon the creation of Pakistan, power passed into the hands of the bureaucracy and the army who, together with the landed classes, have not allowed the emergence of a democratic culture or politics. Consequently, the Pakistani left had to endure an inordinate amount of repression throughout its history and was therefore limited in its ability to present itself as a viable political alternative to the public. Further in 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union it all but disbanded itself and become extremely weak.

In the absence of functioning political formations, social discontent has started to take less overtly confrontational forms and indeed in most cases, does not manifest as an urgent issue demanding redress. The sudden proliferation of NGO's over the last fifteen years has exacerbated this trend since they frame issues of rights and democracy in the most benign terms, primarily to avoid confrontation with the state and further their own interests which lie in keeping the local and international donor community satisfied.

In this context, a need was felt to initiate an effort aimed at reviving collective political consciousness, particularly amongst those facing an immediate threat to their livelihoods or security. While there may not be many prominent examples of spontaneous resistance by communities against the state or other oppressive agents, localized resistance has been taking place across the country as is typified by the struggle of peasants in Punjab against the contract system or the movement of katchi abadi dwellers in major urban areas against the state's attempts to evict them.

Resultantly, the PRM was formed in January 2002 as an umbrella body linking these diverse movements and working to strengthen them while also injecting at least a minimum level of politicization. The organizing principles of the PRM are expressed in its mission statement:

A political, non-partisan confederation of social movements and individuals committed to securing the basic rights to life and sustainable livelihood of marginalized and disadvantaged communities in Pakistan through civil disobedience and direct action based on the mobilization of affected communities. PRM is committed to bringing about structural changes in the state and resisting the oppression of international capital.

A number of characteristics distinguish PRM from other political formations in Pakistan; perhaps foremost amongst them is PRM's emphasis on active engagement with people's problems and the organic evolution of an intellectual foundation, to be forged through struggle rather than purely theoretical means. Older political activists, when attempting to understand the failure of efforts to build a mass movement, acknowledge the widespread tendency that existed amongst them to ascribe to *a priori* conceptions of social and political change, often wildly disparate from the needs and aspirations of working peoples. In fact, one of the well known quips made about the old left (by the old left) is that when it rained in Moscow, raincoats were donned in Pakistan. Learning from past experience, PRM is cognisant of the dangers of importing wholesale models for social change and defining in strict terms a program to be followed. (This does not mean that the past is discredited as having nothing to offer. On the contrary, PRM has been actively trying to engage older activists with the firm belief that there is a wealth of experience that must be utilised in order to move forward).

To reiterate, at this time and for the foreseeable future, PRM does not feel it necessary to be supportive of any distinct systemic alternative to the prevailing order. Agreement on a number of basic principles amongst a diverse group of people forms the intellectual foundation of the organisation. This leads us to another characteristic/function of PRM, related to the first. At a time when progressive forces are scattered far and wide in Pakistan, the most important task must be to collect them. As mentioned earlier, the collapse of the socialist block left many people dispirited and devoid of the hope that positive change was possible. The vast majority of these people have retreated from active politics and any kind of serious collective effort. PRM has taken on the task of gathering people of different ideological persuasions and political affiliations so that a critical mass of activists and intellectuals may be achieved. Unfortunately at this time there exists a great deal of mistrust and infighting amongst the left, the consequences of which are in front of us in the shape of numerous small parties and factions, none of which have the requisite street power to pose any

significant threat to the status quo. PRM was conceived of as a fluid organisation precisely because of this need to bring diverse people together. The basic principles underlying PRM's actions can be articulated as follows, although there is no strict definition and these can be amended or added to on the basis of developments as they take place:

- The military's hold on power must be broken.
- Class consciousness must be inculcated and a mass movement built in accordance with the needs and aspirations of the working masses.
- Decision-making must be decentralized so that people have greater control over their real conditions of life and labour.
- The electoral democratic model is inherently flawed, founded as it is on a limited oligarchic understanding of democracy. This system therefore cannot be upheld as the optimum.
- The systematic internalisation of hierarchical societal trends must be challenged. There is a need to replace identities of caste, class, gender, and religion with an inclusive, politicised identity.
- The market cannot be left to 'self-regulate'. In particular, certain sectors should not be left at the mercy of the market at all, including agriculture, education, and health.

So far, PRM has been operating mainly out of Islamabad/Rawalpindi where a core team of 5-6 persons is regularly active. Other contacts, particularly in cities such as Karachi, Lahore, and Peshawar have yet to make a serious commitment to propagating PRM's politics. This may be the result of numerous factors, including an inability to communicate the PRM concept or a lack of material resources.

The structure of the organization is quite flexible, with the only post being that of national coordinator. This was felt necessary so that day-to-day coordination and communication could be carried out consistently. An office has been in operation in Rawalpindi for the past two years and a monthly publication of PRM activities and articles, *Awami Muzahimat*, is produced and distributed regularly. All finances are raised through personal donations with the largest share coming from those actively involved in the organization, and the remaining through contributions by individuals standing in solidarity with the movement. The model of donor-funded activism is outrightly rejected by those associated with the organization since it is undoubtedly responsible for furthering the decline in political activity. However, there is a very clear need felt at this time to diversify the sources of income and to institute a systematic method of fundraising. In order to grow and be a sustainable effort, PRM must not be dependant on particular individual donations or efforts.

As has been said above, active engagement with people's everyday problems and resistance forms the crux of the PRM's approach. Therefore, the majority of activities over the last two years have centred around supporting various indigenous movements, most prominently the movement of landless tenants in Punjab who have launched a large-scale civil disobedience movement against the state and military authorities. PRM's support to this movement and others such as those of katchi abadi dwellers, affectees of large development projects, fisherfolk, trade unions and student groups has taken many forms including organizing within communities, holding public events to highlight issues, and liaising with national and international media. Mainstream political parties have also been targeted with the intent of holding them accountable for their inaction on popular issues and there has been somewhat of an effort to form international linkages between other groups struggling in similar circumstances. Additionally, numerous seminars, rallies, hunger strikes and other forms of public demonstration have been employed to condemn the role of international financial institutions (IFI's), US imperialism, and the military's role in Pakistan.

It should be made clear at this point that supporting and strengthening people's movements remains the most important part of PRM's work. The ultimate goal of this is two-fold, the first being to encourage resistance to oppressive forces at all levels. Disillusionment with struggle is now strongly ingrained in popular perception; obviously, this has extremely dangerous consequences and must be rectified if we are to hope for any improvement in overall conditions. A necessary step towards accomplishing this is to achieve small victories that can then set precedents for others, the example of the tenant's movement being a case in point. Over the last year, the Anjuman Mazarain Punjab (AMP) has become well-known in all four provinces of the country and is upheld as a big success to be emulated by other groups, particularly those struggling for land, be they peasants or katchi abadi dwellers.

Additionally, supporting movements in the way that PRM does engenders a rapport and the establishment of trust between political activists and the communities in question. This makes possible the second objective of supporting these movements; i.e. to politicize them by situating the immediate situation or issue in a systemic analysis and thereby creating distinct class consciousness. Partly because of the obvious hypocrisy of the NGO's and partly because of the dismal failure of political parties, ordinary people are by now incredibly wary of outsiders. It takes repeated displays

of commitment to their interests to prepare them to engage seriously in discussions and activities that are not directly related to themselves. Even so, PRM finds itself to be less than successful in most cases. The struggles of communities facing threats to their livelihood or security are usually quite parochial and tend to die out once their immediate objective is achieved. To expand the scope of these movements and make them inclusive of more than just immediate or self-interest is the biggest challenge that activists face. Obviously, it is recognized that it will take a long period of time before constant attempts at politicization start to manifest themselves in the self-articulation and organising agendas of movements.

PRM is very much a fledgling experiment at this stage and is taking root in rather rocky ground. It is hoped that the sphere of activists and political workers associated with the movement will continue to expand and that active involvement and critical debate will lead to a rejuvenation of progressive politics in Pakistan.

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