

Pakistan: Solidarity with Student March organisers

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Turnout at the Student Solidarity March on Friday, November 29, was very impressive with demonstrations in 55 cities. Key demands included an end to harassment of students, the removal of military personnel from campuses and the right to organise student unions.

Significantly, slogans calling for socialist solutions were also raised.

Pakistan is currently undergoing a severe economic crisis. The deal with the IMF has led to inflation and unemployment, and rising levels of hunger and poverty. As conditions worsen, the number of revolts increases and movements pick up pace. Educational institutions are plagued by nepotism and corruption, poor quality education and the lack of even basic facilities such as clean drinking water and toilets. The severity of the problems is deepened when we consider the gender angle. The majority of girls from working-class families are deprived not just of higher but often even of elementary education.

On top of that, the ruling classes are not only fighting amongst themselves but also trying, and failing, to grapple with the larger economic crisis that has been deepened by the bailout offered by the IMF. In short, there is a major governmental crisis and, in this situation, the potential for a mass uprising is ripening. The Student Solidarity March, strikes by the Grand Health Alliance and the power workers of WAPDA, among others, and the mobilisations of the Pashtun Protection Movement, PTM, are all manifestations of this potential.

As much as the government is weakening, it is adopting an increasingly defensive and barbaric character. First, law enforcers whisked away Alamgir Wazir, a former Punjab University student who also served as the chairperson of the Pashtun Council, from the premises of the university. He is also the nephew of the National Assembly member and PTM leader Ali Wazir. He had come to the campus to collect his degree of BS Gender Studies from the university and was staying in the campus hostel in his cousin's room. He also addressed the Student Solidarity March on November 29, criticising the state for imposing Urdu as a common language across the country and for military operations that led to the killing of Pashtuns. After Alamgir Wazir was picked up, the Pashtun Council organised a protest outside the Punjab University vice-chancellor's house. Police presented him before a court on December 2 and he was remanded in custody for 14 days.

In Lahore, police have also registered a case against the organisers of the Student Solidarity March, including Alamgir Wazir, Ammar Ali Jan, Farooq Tariq, Iqbal Lala (the father of Mashal Khan, a student of Abdul Wali Khan University in Mardan who was lynched over allegations of blasphemy), along with 250-300 unidentified participants. Police have registered the case on behalf of the state on the grounds that the students were delivering provocative speeches and chanting slogans against the state and its institutions. Police said they will arrest the other people involved in the case as well.

Furthermore, reports are pouring in that Punjab University has cancelled the admission of a female student from Waziristan, who is a cousin of a student activist. The cancellation of her admission and the arbitrary arrest of Alamgir Wazir reveal the racist character of a state in which Pashtuns are among the most frequent targets of racial profiling. However, the state does not stop at racial profiling, it is targeting anyone who challenges the status quo, irrespective of race/ethnicity.

Days before the student march, the Punjab University terminated the postgraduate degree of one of the organisers, Hasnain Jameel, who is an MPhil student of political science. He was notified that his degree has been cancelled and that he is banned from entering the university. Similarly, the government banned all student political activity in the Balochistan province ahead of the march and gave security agencies sweeping powers to prevent student participation in any kind of public gathering.

Despite all these hurdles, the Student Solidarity March was still a success. Indeed, the state's response to students demanding nothing more than their democratic right to unionise and for an end to harassment and militarisation, is confirmation of that success. The organisation in advance of the march also showed how the Pakistani youth are full of energy against the frustrations of a crumbling capitalist system. The turnout and scope of the protest were far bigger than the previous year's march. With the exception of the sectarianism exhibited by a few, such as the IMT, nearly all major left groups endorsed the march and participated in it.

A contingent of working- and lower middle-class people bearing flags of the Pakistan People's Party also joined the march. It is important to think how we should relate to such developments since, despite their support for a bourgeois party, these layers clearly identified with the aims of the march. We need a socialist programme to offer to these sections when they attend our events. Its purpose would be to show them how their current party's programme does not and cannot defend their interests. We fight for working class leadership of the anti-government movement on the basis of our socialist programme and this cannot be done without criticising the rival contenders for the same leadership. With the right kind of politics, we can win those layers whose historical interest lies in the overthrow of capitalism, which is something the PPP can never achieve.

One of the most significant takeaways from this year's march was that the students showed the importance of learning how to organise again. They held public meetings on campuses. They put up posters in the streets. In Lahore, they mobilised at the Faiz Festival and were not deterred by absurd criticisms from the reactionary sections of society. In many areas, students made attempts to go to working- and lower middle-class neighbourhoods and talked to people there to invite them to the protest.

In short, the mobilisations showed that big protests materialise when we learn how to organise them. People don't just swarm to protests in mass numbers because someone created a Facebook event or tweeted about it. Rather, the opposite is true, people tweet, retweet and share things because they see others organising on the ground.

At the same time, we saw how the prime minister and other ministers from the current PTI-led government tried to capture the moment by tweeting apparently in favour of student unions. We also saw how Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari of the PPP came out to condemn the registration of the case against the student march organisers. Murtaza Wahab, Adviser to Chief Minister of Sindh on Law said on Monday that the chief minister of Sindh, Murad Ali Shah, has authorised the restoration of the student bodies in the province. He further said the government of Sindh has in principle decided to restore student unions in educational institutions of the province. Even if this is just an attempt to win popular support, it is an important victory for the student movement.

The PTI is in government in the Centre while the PPP has long held the reins of the Sindh Assembly. In typical neo-liberal fashion, both bourgeois parties are trying co-opt a movement that has emerged from grassroots level mobilisation. This poses the question in which direction the student movement is going to develop under both the threats of the state and attempts of sections of the bourgeoisie and middle classes to capture the moment? If we really want to make true the wishes of those students who shouted slogans in favour of a ?Surkh Asia? [Red Asia], then we have to be aware of this question and develop a strategy of our own.

We demand that:

- Alamgir Wazir be released immediately and unconditionally, and a public admission of error by the administration responsible for the arrest
- all legal actions against the student march organisers, including Alamgir Wazir, be immediately dropped
- cancelled admissions of all students be immediately reinstated
- freedom of assembly and protest for everyone, irrespective of race, ethnicity, citizen status, religion, etc.
- end the racial profiling of Pashtuns, Baloch, Sindhis, Mahajirs, and all oppressed nationalities living under Pakistan rule.
- all the demands of the student march be accepted

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