

The Essence of Politics is Collective: Interview with Alia Amir Ali of the Pakistan Awami Workers Party

Alia Amir Ali

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Alia Amir Ali is a left-wing political worker who has collaborated closely with various working-class movements, students, women, katchi abadi dwellers, and the landless tenants' movement in Punjab. She has been actively involved in the rebuilding of the progressive National Students Federation (NSF) of which she served as former General Secretary (Punjab), and now works closely with the Awami Workers Party (AWP) in Pakistan. She is also a researcher on the Baloch National Movement, and has worked as a lecturer at the Center of Excellence in Gender Studies at Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad. She is currently a PhD researcher at the London School of Economics.

Hard Times (HT): *Could you explain to our readers what the Awami Workers Party is? What is specific and new about it?*

Alia Amir Ali (AAA): To begin with, the AWP is far from a monolith — not unlike most entities I suppose, but perhaps more so than most. In 'representing' the AWP here, I would like to be explicit about the fact that I am speaking *about* but not *for* the organisation in this particular instance. I say this because I believe that many of the conflicts that arise in the Party —

but also in the world at large — derive from attempts to unilaterally define what 'is', rather than accepting that what 'is', is contested. So I'd like to begin by acknowledging the multiplicity of views that exist within the Party, but admittedly — and to some extent inevitably — the views presented here will be my own.

The Awami Workers Party (AWP) is a left-wing political party in Pakistan formed in 2012 as the result of a merger of three older Left parties: the Awami Party, the Workers Party, and the Labour Party. Each of these parties were themselves mergers of

smaller parties and groups that came together a few years prior to the AWP merger, and effectively an amalgamation of their respective ideological allies. In this sense, the formation of the AWP could be seen as an outcome of the Pakistani Left's overall regeneration after the 1990s. The initiative for the creation of the Awami Workers Party came from the young Left embedded within each of the merging parties. Being few in number and scattered across multiple organisations, this young Left (including myself) began connecting with each other and eventually took it upon themselves to mobilise their respective cadres and leaders to come together. It is important to recognise here that this young Left pushed for the merger despite having important differences with the "old (and male, I may add) guard" which was – and in certain respects, still is – at the helm of Left parties here. Yet, it came through because this initiative was based fundamentally on the adherence to two core principles by all involved (even if to varying degrees) - *acceptance and the courage to take risks.*

To contextualise how these principles were at work, I suggest that the AWP was born out of:

1. An acceptance that the Left has been all but decimated from Pakistan's political landscape, and the courage to 'begin again';

2. An acceptance of differences within the Left – which was unthinkable from the perspective of entrenched Cold War factionalism – and subsequently, a willingness from the 'old guard' to unite with those they had fought bitterly in the past – and, in doing so, (courageously) agreeing to dissolve the identities that they had carried and embodied for long.

3. An acceptance of the Left's heritage by the young Left; a willingness to not selectively pick and choose which of the Left's history it owns or disowns, but rather to claim it, with all its flaws and strengths, and take it forward (an act of courage);

4. An acceptance by the 'old guard' that they must cede space to the young, and the courage to follow their lead in important (if not all) respects.

5. An acceptance of the collective as primary, and the courage (of young comrades in particular) to give up individual "activism" in favour of a wider, more disciplined, collective "politics" where you can't just "do your own thing"!

The extent to which these principles continue to inform, and be actively cultivated in, the Party's political culture will, in my view, be crucial to the longevity and success of this political experiment.

The AWP is jokingly – and often patronisingly – referred to in Left circles as an *ajooba* party, i.e. a 'strange' or 'peculiar' party. This quip is itself evidence

of our distinctiveness from other Left parties in Pakistan, which lies partly in the dynamics of its genesis (described above) but also in the following features:

1. Ideological hybridity:

Ideologically, as indicated above, the AWP is a broadly Left party. We have struggled hard to overcome the Cold-War identities of Stalinist, Trotskyist, Maoist, etc. Indeed, the merging entities were themselves of different Left 'tendencies'. (The Labour Party was 'Trotskyist', the Workers Party was a combination of 'Marxist-Leninist' and 'Maoist' cadres and the Awami Party 'social-democratic' in orientation). One of the impetuses for the merger was the recognition that these divisions were the product of a particular world-historical context and that we have nothing left to fight over any more; moreover, that the Left has been so successfully decimated that those who still agree on the common project of the Left as a systemic anti-capitalist anti-status-quo alternative must find a minimum common denominator upon which to recollect and rebuild the Left in Pakistan.

2. Loose-federalist organisational structure

Unlike most of its more centralised predecessors, the Awami Workers Party is federal in structure, with largely autonomous "national units" in each of Pakistan's ethnic-regions (which are not

always congruous with the administrative demarcations called 'provinces') and affiliated organisations (bearing the same name) in the constitutionally 'disputed' and 'special' regions such as Gilgit-Baltistan and Kashmir. The AWP's national units are in turn comprised of units at the district and further down at the union council, neighbourhood, village, or community level.

The loose, federalist Party structure is indicative of its political/ideological orientation; in particular, of the Party's adherence to the "national question"- i.e. its commitment to upholding the principles of national autonomy (including their right to self-determination and secession), and the right of ethnic-nations to participate in the Pakistani federation (if they so choose) as equal economic, political and social entities, rather than as mere administrative units governed by the Centre (which in Pakistan's context refers to central Punjab).

3. Engagement with feminism

While the "national question" has been a part of the Pakistani Left's lexicon virtually since its inception (even though this too has been a matter of intense debate, particularly in the 60s and 70s), the "woman question" is much newer to the Pakistani Left. Indeed, most Left parties in Pakistan continue to be oblivious - and some hostile - to feminism.

The words “patriarchy” or “gender” do not appear in their manifestos or party positions. The AWP on the other hand – the younger cadres in particular – have slowly but consistently pushed (within the party and outside it) for greater engagement with feminism, both on the level of theory and practice. The feminists within the AWP - both women and men - have not had it easy, but to their credit, and to the credit of party members generally, there is now certainly a greater acceptance for feminism within the AWP than there was in 2012. For example:

The latest AWP manifesto recognises gender as amongst its principal contradictions (the manifesto does not distinguish between primary and secondary contradictions anyway), and unambiguously states its intention to participate in the dismantling of patriarchy. Going further than equating feminism with women’s liberation alone, AWP’s selection candidates from Islamabad last year presented a detailed plan to support the struggles of transgender, queer, and non-binary people. The AWP has instituted a quota of minimum 33% representation of women in its Federal Committee (which applies in principle to party units at all levels) — that it struggles to meet this figure in practice is a different (but important) matter. A sexual harassment policy is being tabled in the Party; this has met with resistance, but that is hardly surprising, given the

heavily patriarchal social context from which the Pakistani Left originates. While there is certainly a long way to go before the Party (and the Left in general) imbibes a feminist consciousness, the gains made so far should not be understated; if anything, they are even more significant because of the (difficult) social context in which they have been made.

4. Popularising Left discourse

The AWP seeks to become popular (not *populist* of course), and to (re)introduce Left discourse into the Pakistani mainstream political sphere. Historically, the Pakistani Left engaged in underground politics that involved making secretive ‘cells’ and being extremely cautious about who to let into their ranks. The AWP is an ‘open’ party, seeking to both build its cadres and also expand its membership into social segments that may not necessarily agree with all of the party’s socialist principles and goals.

The AWP believes that the need of these times is (among others) visibility in the public eye — and we understand the complex and compromised routes that must be charted out to become visible (as well as the dangers inherent within the same). The party’s strategies for meeting its objectives are being formulated, tried, tested, and revised. Our most recent ‘experiment’ has been contesting elections, and using the electoral process as a means to gain

visibility, to deepen and widen our work with various communities, and to improve our understanding of the electoral field. (It was in the 1970s last that the Left – in alliance with progressive ethnic-nationalists – had an electoral presence on the national level; which we are nowhere close to as yet!)

HT: *How does the AWP relate to other left parties and to the numerous social movements in Pakistan?*

AAA: As discussed above, the AWP itself was an attempt to bring together what's left of the Left in Pakistan – which it continues to try and do even now. Much of our time is spent engaging with current social movements. Though they use different idioms and political imagery to present themselves, these movements can be characterised broadly as movements against ongoing dispossession. The spectrum of current social movements comprises:

- a) movements of the urban poor – such as *katchi abadi* (slum) dwellers' movements against forced evictions, workers' movements against privatisation, downsizing, pay cuts, job precarity etc.;
- b) (rural) landless tenants' movements against summary evictions (such as the Okara peasants' movement, which at its peak involved many tens of thousands of tenant-farmers in Punjab, the country's

economic and political heartland;

- c) ethnic-national and regional movements, most recently the *Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement* (PTM), which literally means “a Movement for the Security of the Pashtun people”, demanding accountability for opaque military operations and state violence (in the form of forced migrations/displacement, enforced disappearances of dissenters, etc.) perpetuated in the peripheries in the name of the “War on Terror”.

The one significant exception to the above is the feminist movement – which I call an exception due to its decidedly young urban middle-class character and its harbingers being bearers of social mobility rather than of material dispossession. In my view, the feminist movement in Pakistan (as an organic *movement*) is only just beginning to emerge (though some Pakistani feminists would disagree with me on this). The unprecedented scale and intensity of the backlash from mainstream/religious quarters to the *Aurat March* (*Aurat* means ‘woman’) that took place in multiple cities and towns on International Women's Day this year suggests that this is perhaps the first time that Pakistani feminist voices were strong, coherent, and organised enough to make themselves heard in the mainstream (in addition to the backlash being a grim reminder of growing religious/right-wing radicalism). Though largely liberal in orientation, there is growing receptivity

to socialist-feminist slogans, analysis and demands in the movement at this stage.

The AWP's aim is to create solidarities with and between these movements and to bring them closer to the Party's socialist ideals as well to as the Party organisation. We seek to unify action in the initial instance through the formation of working groups and alliances which maintain the diversity of organisational (and more broadly, social) identities that individuals and movements come with to the struggle. It is essential to build trust – which relies heavily on good communication – with these various and disparate movements if we are to create a shared Left politics. Towards this end, the AWP has created women's and students' 'fronts' (with greater autonomy than the fronts of previous Communist parties perhaps) so as to find (and create) common cause and platforms for action with progressive but 'non-aligned' political actors within these movements.

HT: *How would you describe the situation and the prospects of the left in Pakistan?*

AAA: It must be acknowledged that the analysis – and the practice – of the Pakistani Left (the AWP included) are seriously outdated. Even though the AWP is beginning to take seriously questions of ecology, feminism, digital technology, and financialisation and working to

familiarise its cadres with these debates, the Pakistani Left in general is yet to come to terms with the need to revamp its theoretical tools, concepts (and hence language), to rethink its constituencies, its political programme, its slogans, and to be creative in its strategies moving forward. Much of the Left spends an inordinate amount of time lamenting the 'corrupting' role of NGOs and looking for enemies to blame for its current predicament, rather than coming to terms with the real (material and ideological) shifts that have occurred in Pakistan and the world over since the heydays of Left revolutions in the 20th century.

As an entity on the political landscape, the Left in Pakistan still has a long way to go. Electorally, we are at a very nascent stage. The question of how to engage with religion continues to be a vexed one. Resisting state/corporate surveillance and renewed military hegemony is increasingly difficult. Space for dissent has shrunk considerably, and organisational survival itself is a struggle even for 'open' parties like the AWP. Take for instance the fact that the AWP's website was blocked during our election campaign last year—and remained blocked for many months even after the elections had passed!

In 'objective' terms, however, the space for the left has grown, as it does everywhere where the fallouts of neoliberalism start to hit people. In Pakistan too, class, ethnic-

regional, and gendered divisions – and violence – are on the rise; urbanisation, unemployment, inflation, gentrification, and privatisation are accelerating at breathtaking speed; access to housing, health, education, water, and other utilities is diminishing, and political repression and media censorship are at an all time high. Yet the subjectivities of these classed, ethnicised, and gendered ‘subjects’ are far from transformative – certainly (but not only) in the ‘centre’ (which I use here both in a spatial and demographic sense). Indeed, the ‘common sense’ that is prevalent is that of how to fit into the system rather than change it – discourses that operate from top to bottom and morph into different versions at every rung of the social ladder.

Being a Party that seeks to popularise/mainstream socialist discourse but recognises that the system’s ‘losers’ are far from inhabiting a socialist consciousness is reflected in the Party’s decision to state in its manifesto the ultimate goal of building socialism but drafting its immediate political programme in light of prevailing material and subjective conditions which call for supporting people’s entitlements to basic goods and services and productive assets, rather than calling for the abolishment of private property as we are told all “true” Communists should.

HT: *This issue of Hard Times is focusing on the state*

of the left worldwide. From your perspective, in what ways is the situation in Pakistan similar, in what ways different from that in other countries?

AAA: I came into the world in an era where all “grand narratives” including Communism were supposedly dead and those who held those beliefs were dying. Resistance had become limited to a “calling out” of each other or those who are in relatively close proximity to our selves, ‘exposing’ them and the everyday violence that characterises these systems, rather than imagining - and creating - with others, the means of *dismantling* and *transforming* systems, and challenging political power through organised politics.

Now the tide has turned. The world over – and in Pakistan – there has been a resurgence of the organised Left. And a (stronger) resurgence of the Right. Even though we have far from won the battle in most places (let alone the war), these are exciting times. Over the last decade in particular, we have seen the challenge is no longer to disprove the mantra that “socialism is dead” - people have already disproved this orthodoxy through popular movements like Occupy and the Arab Spring, the rise (and in some cases, fall) of left-wing electoral forces in Europe, Latin America, South Asia and not least the emergence of Corbyn in the UK and Sanders in the US as serious contenders for political office.

The challenge is now to answer the question of what organised socialist politics that challenges and wrests political power from its adversaries can deliver in the present time. Critiquing capitalism and its destructiveness is no longer sufficient in any sense, whether in presenting a real alternative to the destruction of the planet and all living beings on it (including human beings), or in winning over the multitudes whose will, intellect, consciousness and action are required to make a Left alternative 'real'. What alternatives do we present; what is our plan for the people, for the planet, and for the intelligent machines we have ourselves created? What are our strategies for dealing with the defenders of the status quo, who may not just outdo us in money, weapons, and technological sophistication, but also in numbers, by controlling to an unprecedented extent what the rest of us know, think, and feel?

HT: *On a more personal note, you don't like to be called an 'activist'. Why?*

AAA: 'Activism' has become an acceptable, even trendy word, while 'politics' has been vilified. The former is considered 'clean', laudable, and sincere, while the latter is accused of replicating and even promoting hierarchies, dominance, and sectional interests. (I recognise that the antipathy to organised politics has been significantly overturned in recent years in places,

which is heartening). I find "activism" to be a de-politicisation of politics itself.

I see the rise of "activism" as a term as embedded in a historical context which has seen the rise of "anti-politics politics" - a kind of politics championed by right-wing leaders across the world - from Imran Khan in Pakistan, to Modi in India, and Trump in the US. Anti-corruption discourses championed by Khan and Modi have been targeted squarely at politicians and the public sector - not at corporations, not at militaries. Pakistan's self-professed religious reformer Tahir-ul-Qadri's motto was "Siasat nahin, Riasat Bachao" (Save the State, not Politics) which garnered significant popular support.

Moreover, 'activism' connotes individual action, which no matter how principled or noble, nevertheless lacks something I consider fundamental to the process of social transformation: the collective. Being an 'activist' allows you to act solely at your own discretion and convenience; everything from deciding which problems are worthy of action and why they are problematic, to chalking out a strategy for countering the problem, identifying potential allies, and devising a mode of action (including how, where, and when to 'act') is done individually. Individual liberty as the fountain for action seems to me to mirror the very (neoliberal) problem that many of these (surely well-meaning!) activists claim to be fighting.

In my view, it is not just the content of political action but also its form that is of fundamental importance in shaping the course that politics takes. As I see it, the essence of politics is collective, and hence to be found in collectives.