

Discussing Democracy in Islamabad

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The three-day conference on 'Democracy in South Asia' in Islamabad, organised by the Lahore-based Citizens' Commission for Human Development, brought together academics and social activists from various South Asian countries. It was probably the first effort of its kind held in Pakistan to discuss and debate about prospects for democracy in South Asia that involved participants from most of the countries in the region. All credit for this goes to the inimitable Farrah Parvaiz Saleh, head of the CCHD, who conceived of the project and administered every small detail that it entailed.

In his address to the conference, the Pakistani Prime Minister, Syed Yousuf Gilani, talked about the movement for democracy in Pakistan and suggested that the various countries in South Asia had much to learn from each other in this regard. Somewhat the same general points were made by Faisal Karim Kundi, Deputy Speaker of the Pakistan National Assembly. Other leading Pakistani politicians made similar comments.

One of the most enriching presentations was by Raza Rabbani, Leader of the House, Senate of Pakistan and senior leader of the Pakistan Peoples' Party. He dwelt at length with the prospects of genuine democracy in Pakistan. He rebutted the allegation that Islam and democracy were incompatible, arguing that this was a convenient way to justify authoritarianism and deny democracy to Muslim peoples. This argument, he noted, distracted attention from one of the principal causes of undemocratic regimes in many Muslim-majority countries, namely Western imperialism, which has a vested interest in backing such regimes in order to serve Western economic, political and strategic purposes, fearing that democratic regimes would refuse to toe Western dictates. He referred to America's strong backing to the late Pakistani dictator Zia ul-Haq, under whose rule Pakistan experienced a long spell of brutal authoritarian rule, and who supported American interests at the cost of those of the majority of the Pakistani people. He also cited several instances of Western powers, particularly America, actually overthrowing or undermining democratically-elected regimes in Muslim countries. He talked about the 'double-standards' of Western powers in their attitude towards Islamic movements, as exemplified in their support to such groups in the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan and now having totally reversed their stance. And today, despite its rhetoric about supporting 'democracy' in the Muslim world, Senator Rabbani stressed, America was consistently supporting General Musharraf, who had no democratic mandate to rule Pakistan and who, he claimed, was bent on putting the Pakistani Constitution into abeyance, for which he was being solidly backed by his American patrons.

Pakistan, Senator Rabbani noted, is a federation, and can survive and progress only under democracy (a point that applies to other such states such as India as well). The smaller federating units must feel that they are vital stakeholders in the system, and their economic, cultural and political grievances must be addressed. This requires, he argued, a genuine parliamentary system, not the quasi-presidential system that Musharraf has converted Pakistan into, where decision-making is confined to a single person, where the cabinet is virtually redundant, where the Parliament has been

converted into a rubber-stamp and where a President who does not enjoy the support of the majority of the people has the right to dismiss elected assemblies. Obviously, Rabbani pointed out, in such a system where an individual's whims can rule over vital state institutions and where the military-bureaucracy-feudal lord nexus throttles people's voices genuine democracy cannot flourish.

The same point was articulated equally passionately by the cricketer-turned politician Imran Khan, President of the Pakistan Tehrik-e Insaf Party. He insisted that Musharraf had no mass support and that he was deliberately projecting to his Western backers the erroneous spectre of Pakistan being taken over by Islamist radicals if he were removed from power simply in order to be allowed to continue to rule the country.

A brilliant presentation by a young Pakistani scholar, Junaid Ahmad, dealt with the question of democracy, human rights and the so-called Western 'civilisational' project for the Muslim world, including Pakistan. Ahmad noted that in recent years, particularly after the events of 11 September 2001, neo-conservatives in America have been on a desperate search for 'moderate' Muslims, that is Muslims who are 'moderate' in terms of their attitudes towards the American establishment, rather than being committed to genuine social justice and democracy. Such 'moderate' Muslims have little or no mass support, and are often apologists for Western hegemony. The entire project of 'civilising' the Muslim world that the West has now taken on itself reeks of the legacy of the colonial White Man's Burden and is yet another means to bolster Western domination. In this project, key issues such as human rights, gender justice, poverty and inter-community relations are allowed to be addressed simply through Western-funded NGOs, which often have no organic links with the masses, rather than through political mobilization. This, in turn, has crucial consequences in terms of depoliticisation of social movements and co-optation of committed social activists as these issues come to be discussed simply through conferences, rather than through mass mobilisation. Further, such Western-backed 'moderate' Muslims and their NGOs are, because of their financial dependence on their patrons, not allowed to effectively critique and challenge Western imperialism, the global capitalist system, the so-called 'war on terror' and internal and external structures of oppression.

Ahmad called for the emergence of 'organic' or socially engaged Muslim intellectuals (and the same could be said in the case of other religious communities as well), strongly rooted in their communities, working together in solidarity with others against all forms of oppression, including in the name of religion. In this, he argued, these intellectuals could be inspired by socially liberatory under-standings of their own faiths.

Equally trenchant critiques of ruling class politics and alliances with imperialism were articulated by some Indian participants. Karen Gabriel of the Centre for Women's Development, New Delhi, spoke about the state-sponsored virtual genocidal attacks on Muslims in Gujarat, and of how these and other victims of Hindu chauvinism, often in league with sections of the state machinery, have made a mockery of India's claims to being the world's largest democracy. P.K Vijayan from Delhi University argued on similar lines, critiquing Brahminical Hinduism from a Dalit or 'low' caste point of view, stressing that it was wholly opposed to any sense of democracy. Azim Ahmad Khan, Director of the World Learning Programme, Jaipur, elaborated on this

point by highlighting the oppressive conditions under which the vast majority of India's Dalits continue to groan under, suggesting, therefore, that formal democracy, in the form of voting rights to all citizens, was hardly enough to guarantee substantive democracy in terms of social and economic power.

This writer's own presentation was on the debate about Islam and democracy, in which it was argued to problematise the question by pointing to the diverse understandings of both Islam and democracy. Based on a case study of three noted Indian Muslim scholars, the argument was built against the tendency to essentialise Islam and Muslims (or any other religion and religious community, for that matter) and pointed out the possibility of generating contextually relevant understandings of Islam (and other faiths) that are genuinely rooted in the quest for comprehensive social justice and inter-faith solidarity against oppression and other such democratic demands.

A host of other speakers graced the conference, including several members of Pakistan's National Assembly, both from the ruling Pakistan People's Party and from various opposition groups, as well as participants from Nepal and Bangladesh, adding their own invaluable inputs and insights. □□□