

The Pakistani Left's Bizarre Obsession with the Western Left

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During the days after former Prime Minister Imran Khan was ousted from office, there was jubilation by the Pakistani liberal-left. But they figured out quickly that they had to go into overdrive to produce and police a narrative of what happened. But bizarrely, that narrative wasn't being constructed for Pakistanis, but for some mysterious 'Western Left.'

The Pakistani Left's success was given a tremendous boost by the incredibly biased coverage this Pakistani Left wanted the Western Left to hear in a few segments of Democracy Now. Apparently, only socialist and communist party cadres who report to their politburo represent all of the people of Pakistan for Democracy Now. However, Democracy Now was so thoroughly embarrassed itself after receiving a plethora of highly critical email feedback indicting its incredibly biased and shallow coverage of some of the largest popular mobilizations in the country. It thankfully stayed away from the subject from that time onwards.

But this began a pattern. A Pakistani Left which normally is involved in or at least supportive of the most important social struggles in the country all of a sudden became obsessed with a 'Western Left' that may consider these mobilizations and the figure of Imran Khan as something meaningful, as an important political development that clearly entailed massive numbers of protestors against the new regime.

Sadly, the Pakistani Left seemed to prioritize how the Western Left sees Imran Khan over everything and everyone else. As Prof. Sher Ali Tareen (is this Quetta-born outstanding Pakistani scholar a part of the Western Left to?), Imranophobia was at its peak at this point.

Bewildered by how a man whose period of governance was less than desirable could mobilize millions throughout the country, the Pakistani Left – rather than trying to engage in a period replete with possibilities of bringing more radical proposals to the table – turned its attention to privileged Western Left academics and activists rather than millions of ordinary Pakistanis out in the streets.

It was rather comical how the Pakistani Left had to keep changing their script: oh, well Khan just has an urban educated base of support. Oh wait, there is huge support among the Pashtuns as well. And perhaps he also some significant support in the Punjab and in Karachi. They were trying every trick in the book to downplay mass support for Khan, and resentment for the new regime.

In fact, Pankaj Mishra's deployment of the term *resentiment* seemed very appropriate in capturing the mood in the country. A profoundly angry population was tired of sitting on the sidelines as spectators to the shenanigans of the power elite of their country.

But the Pakistani Left ensured that these were footnotes to be ignored and that these popular mobilizations entailed either fascists, youthful idiots, and whatever other condescending (very of often vulgar and abusive) term you want to use for them. Massive rallies in city after city taking place, incredibly disciplined and peaceful, were taking place and the Pakistani Left's concern was how to bury these developments, not to veto them out of history as Chomsky often says.

The Pakistani Left, just like any other Pakistani, is correct to be critical of Khan on many fronts. But this insidious game they played to police and discipline different narratives about what's happening in the country was Stalinism and McCarthyism at its finest.

The Obsessive Compulsive Disorder involved in their relationship with the Western Left seemed utterly outlandish. It was a colonized mind at its finest, concerned more with what the White Man thinks of you than you think of yourself and your people.

We also wondered who the heck is this 'Western Left' that our Pakistani leftist luminaries kept referring to. Is it the International Socialist Organization (ISO), white Antifa-type anarchists, BLM activists, the DSA, who? Or an individual here and there sitting in their basement tweeting away. Regardless, the obsession seemed farcical.

A 'Western Left' that is barely relevant in their own countries is now being bombarded by an equally impotent Pakistani Left to regurgitate a tight script on political developments in Pakistan: Khan is no 'anti-imperialist hero,' he's a demagogue, he doesn't really have mass support (unlike us Pakistani leftists of course), and the people you do see who are coming out are buffoons or fascists. We are the Pakistani Left, even though half of us will reside most of our lives living in the West, so we know best and the 'Western Left' better just shut up about anything concerning Pakistan.

That also was a comical component of this saga: the constant criticisms of expat Pakistani intellectuals and ordinary Pakistanis for not being and living in Pakistan (and therefore having warped views of Pakistan) by many Pakistani Leftist intellectuals who themselves are not working and living in Pakistan! Now that's something to chuckle about. These Pakistani Leftist intellectuals are more or less genuine in their progressive politics, so I would rather not use the term 'hypocrites' for them. But in any other case, hypocrisy is the only word one can think of to describe such behavior.

Indeed, the entire saga over the past few months has been highly instructive. Instead of trying to join and engage popular mobilizations to radicalize the movement even further, fairly privileged and elite Pakistani Left intellectuals and activists, either sitting abroad or at campuses which are virtual extensions of the US embassy or the Pakistani military establishment, were fixated on one thing and one thing alone: how this amorphous,

undefined, supposedly monolithic 'Western Left' must view Pakistan, Khan, the popular mobilizations, etc. The Pakistani Left could have cared all this time about how a Kashmiri thought of Khan, or a Palestinian, or a Pashtun – but no, the Western Left controls independent and alternative media and hence, they are a far more important audience to target. These Western Leftists are the ones that are going to turn to 'us' and give us global standing and legitimacy, even though that legitimacy rarely exists in Pakistan itself!

Meanwhile, elderly women, working class students, displaced persons from the 'War on Terror' – all a part of these mobilizations, mattered nothing to the Pakistani Left because the latter had a more important job: ensuring that the Western Left continues to anoint them as the saviors of Pakistan, and not be distracted by Khan or these millions of people rallying for change.

The saddest part is that genuine organic left movements in the Global South mostly don't give a damn about what some mythical 'Western Left' thinks about them. They are busy in the struggle to shape their societies for the better. And while the Pakistani Left is usually doing incredibly laudable work and activism, since April their intellectual twitteratis have had nothing better to do than to condemn some phantom 'Western Left' for being bamboozled into believing that Washington or the Pakistani military may have had something to do with Khan's ouster.

Rarely do we see genuine organic left movements in countries so obsessed not with what their own countrywomen and men think of them, or the most oppressed, but with how the ghosts of the 'Western Left' perceives them, and more importantly, Imran Khan.

It is sad that a much-needed Pakistani Left has abandoned genuine political criticisms, and has propelled Imranophobia (thanks SherAli Tareen) on overdrive. It is a shame that psychological envy (why can Khan mobilize tens of millions while we can only mobilize tens) has replaced meaningful political engagement within the Pakistani Left. Nevertheless, it does seem like psychoanalysis would possibly reveal more about the Khan and Khan-supporter hatred among the Pakistani Left. And that is very unfortunate when we are at a very rare but exciting moment when transformational politics can be advanced and radicalized to take on a military establishment in panic mode.

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