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Pakistan

Pakistan, hostage of the religious - The radical left in resistance

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The Pakistani Supreme Court had just declared Asia Bibi innocent of the crime of blasphemy for which she was previously sentenced to death. Religious movements did not accept the decision and fought back, calling to paralyze the country by blocking the roads, opening a major political crisis. Pierre Rousset was in Lahore precisely at this moment and following is his report.

The radical left in Pakistan was celebrating from 9 to 11 November the 50th anniversary of the uprisings of 1968-1969, a crisis deeper than that we experienced in France [1]. I was invited to present "our May 68". A group of mullahs, returning from a visit to Mecca, was on the plane that was taking us to Lahore. They were kind to me, but not to their sisters. I had to change places twice because they did not want to sit next to a woman. The Pakistani lady seated beside me, head uncovered, was getting tense. The stewardess was getting exasperated. Atmosphere.

The Supreme Court declared Asia Bibi innocent on October 31 – the day of my arrival. A new radical religious party, the Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP) [2], had called pre-emptively to block the roads to express their joy if Asia Bibi's death sentence was confirmed, or to go on the counter-offensive if not. Other fundamentalist movements joined the mobilization. My friend Farooq picked me up by car (he had to wake up very early to be sure to be on time). All the ways out of the airport zone were closed. We turned around a long time to find a breach, then looked for side roads that would allow us to reach his home.

Asia Bibi is a Christian, agricultural worker, poor, mother of five children. She has been in prison for almost 10 years, sentenced to death, accused of using water from a well "reserved" for Muslims [3]. The Supreme Court recognized that the charge was inconsistent and that there were indications of local revenge against her. The blasphemy law was originally a legacy of British colonization, but it was hardened in 1986 by General Zia-ul-Haq. Since then, this law has been used many times in sectarian religious conflicts, to settle personal accounts or to take possession of coveted property. Most of the victims are Muslims, but minorities (3% of the population) are under constant threat of religious cleansing. Entire villages can be attacked for alleged blasphemy.

Originally, Pakistan was not an *Islamist* state. But most likely the rot had set in. The partition of the British Indian Empire in 1947 was based on a religious division (Hindus and Muslims), causing huge population displacements and numerous massacres. Provinces were cut in two: Punjab in the west, Bengal in the east (the border with East Pakistan which became in 1971 an independent country, Bangladesh). In his first speech to the Pakistan National Assembly [4], Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the "founding father", acknowledged that his previous partition policy was being criticized.

The new state was an Islamic Republic; but he wanted it to be open to all religions, all castes, all classes without discrimination. The laws in force were inherited from English law or customary traditions. The Islamization of the country was done against this heritage of Jinnah. It was fully enforced only under the dictatorship of General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq who took power in 1977. It was in no way a response to an external threat (Washington supported Pakistan against India and Moscow). It served to consolidate illegitimate power.

The price of this forced Islamization was heavy. Henceforth, any person accused of blasphemy or who protests against this law finds him or herself in danger of death. In 2011, the governor of the province of Punjab, a member of the government party, Salman Taseer, was assassinated by his bodyguard because he had defended Asia Bibi. The judges of the Supreme Court, the lawyers who defended Asia, as well as her relatives are all now being threatened.

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In this situation of great tension, holding meetings against all odds is perceived as an act of resistance. I first met with students and they feared to be only 3 or 4 present, but close to 30 came. Then I spent a day with members and sympathizers of the Fourth International. It should have been a national meeting. The participation was reduced, even the trade unionists of the suburbs of Lahore could not come: the gates of the city were blocked. Nonetheless, the meeting took place.

At the weekend, the organization The Struggle, which recently tied regular links with the Fourth International, held its Congress. Some 2000 participants were expected; more than 1600 came. Given the situation, it was a real success, even if the participation of women was reduced (it is very dangerous for women to move around when mullahs block roads). Their Congress took place under a large banner celebrating their 68-69 Years. So, in these circumstances, the presence of a Frenchman who personally experienced this decade was doubly appreciated: a past of common struggles, the affirmation of solidarity in times of crisis.

Moving around was a constant puzzle, but the noose was now loosening. Under street pressure, the government compromised with the TLP allowing it to appeal against the Supreme Court ruling. Imran Khan, the new Prime Minister had been elected with the support of the military and was cajoling the fundamentalists. This is the problem of Pakistan. Successive governments have regularly yielded to the demands of fundamentalists. How to go back?

I was able to reach the airport safely for my return flight – but the fate of Asia Bibi is still on hold. Is she still in prison, in a safe secret place? We do not know. International pressure is strong and Imran Khan must take it into account. Hopefully.

PS:

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[1] See on ESSF (word 14059), 1968-69 (Pakistan): <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spi...>

[2] "Pakistani Movement I am here".

[3] See ESSF (word 7080), Aasia Bibi: <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spi...>

[4] ESSF (Article 46833), First Presidential Address to the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan: <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spi...>