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Pakistan

“We the (Seditious) People”: Repression and Revolution in South Asia

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Colonial-era sedition laws used to criminalize dissent to protect imperial sovereignty. Now that “The People are sovereign” in independent India and Pakistan, why are they still being charged with sedition?

The recently concluded Students Solidarity March in Pakistan created excitement across the barren political landscape of the country. It was a remarkable achievement to organize mass rallies in 53 cities in a country that banned student politics thirty-five years ago. Not only did the sheer numbers of the march take the government and the public by surprise, but the left-wing slogans chanted by the assembled youth stunned the establishment. The ruling elites of the country thought they had long buried the ideas of socialism, whose return on such a wide-scale could only appear as a ghost haunting their consciousness.

This is why their response to the march has been absurdly contradictory. On the one hand, the highest echelons of the government (including the Prime Minister) announced support for the restoration of student unions in Pakistan. On the other hand, the state slapped charges of sedition on the organizers of the march and jailed one of the participants, Alamgir Wazir, in Lahore.

I am one of the individuals accused of sedition â€” merely for participating in a rally demanding student unions, safe campuses, and greater funding for higher education in Pakistan. It is indeed bizarre to be termed an enemy of the state for voicing dissent over the disastrous conditions of higher learning in the country. But one is horrified (and strangely comforted) to see the sedition law used just as pervasively across the border, in India. One feels part of a larger community experiencing collectively the madness engulfing our region â€” one that equates loyalty to the ruling dispensation with patriotism, and resistance with treason.

Politics has always been split between those who view it as a means to accumulate more power and those who consider it a vehicle for pursuing justice. It is the latter conception that is being criminalized across our region. The suppression of dissent using the sedition law raises larger questions about the nature of state and society relations as well as the place of violence in contemporary South Asia. I share a few reflections on the subject as we await the judiciary’s decision on sedition charges against us for daring to exercise our democratic rights.

Sedition and Popular Sovereignty

The subcontinent is witnessing a strange rebirth of nationalism. Historically, the phenomenon fuelled anti-colonial sentiment to wrest control from the mighty British Empire. The category of “The People” emerged as a response to the denial of citizenship and democracy to Indians by a colonial regime that justified its loot and plunder in the name of the civilizing mission. The alien sovereignty asserted by the British was challenged by the notion of “popular sovereignty”, which insisted on the autonomy and self-determination of the Indian people.

The birth of the nation was thus intertwined with the birth of the People, the former becoming the vehicle for expressing the popular will. The colonial state viewed calls for liberty and freedom by Indians as attempts to undermine imperial sovereignty over the subcontinent. The sedition laws were among the most widely used legislation to curb the burgeoning freedom struggle across India. They were used against militant organizations such as Ghadar and Anushulan Party, as well as mainstream leaders such as Tilak, M.N. Roy, Gandhi and Maulana Azad. For these leaders, sedition charges became a rite of passage for displaying their loyalty to the nation.

This is the reason why Michel Foucault’s work does not capture the genealogy of the prison system under colonial conditions. In India, jails failed to attain the power of disciplinary institutions that could produce subjugated subjects. Instead, by deliberately breaking the law, anti-colonial fighters transformed jails into public theaters that produced political celebrities out of individuals embodying the suffering of their people.

Thus, popular sovereignty was represented by those who were willing to separate themselves from the existing colonial order. Dissent, nation, and the people were intimately tied together in the anti-colonial struggle.

Today, we are viewing an accelerated dismantling of this history, as the nation is being defined not by the people, but by majoritarian groups or lifeless state “institutions”, and dissenting voices are the primary targets of sedition laws. It is the tragedy of our so-called post-colonial world that â€˜The People” have been refashioned from being “sovereigns” to mere law and order problems, wiping out the memory of nationalism’s entanglement with dissent and insurgent populations.

It is even more absurd when the state acknowledges the sovereignty of the People while simultaneously viewing them as seditious. Indeed, who are the people being seditious against if they are the rulers? Yes, the people may indulge in unlawful, even criminal, activities but how is it possible for them to overthrow their own sovereign rule? More importantly, what is it about the nature of our state apparatuses that predominantly view their own people as potential security risks?

State as Counter-Revolutionary Machine

In the 1910s and 1920s, there was a flurry of cases against Indians who were deemed to be part of a foreign conspiracy to overthrow imperial rule. This fear of “foreign intervention” emanated from the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 and Lenin’s open support to anti-colonial struggles. Communism was designated as the primary threat to colonial rule: Sir David Petrie, head of Indian intelligence, termed it “a plague” that threatened to engulf British India.

It is this fear of communism, and more broadly “Revolution”, that fuelled the formation of an apparatus that could pre-empt any radical upheaval. As Russia witnessed an imperialist-backed counter-revolution immediately after the Bolsheviks took power, Herbert Marcuse suggested that the fear of the Russian Revolution forced other governments to begin counter-revolutionary violence even before there was a revolution. In a temporal reversal, most parts of the world experienced counter-revolutionary measures prior to revolutionary upheavals.

India was no different, as the British went about turning the colonial state into a counter-revolutionary machine during the inter-war period. Not only were anti-government actions deemed seditious, but even the circulation of “dangerous ideas” was viewed as a threat to colonial sovereignty. The most famous demonstration of colonial paranoia was the Meerut Conspiracy Case in which partisans of the communist movement were handed life sentences. Their alleged crime included the possession of books written by Marx, Engels, and Lenin. Radical thought itself had to be criminalized.

The witch-hunt against revolutionaries defined the late colonial state as imperial officials launched a colossal international effort to “neutralize” Indian radicalism. This effort involved not only the intelligence and security apparatuses, but also the judiciary, the heavily censored media, as well as local administration. For example, in the Meerut Conspiracy Case, the judiciary accepted the arguments of intelligence agencies connecting the possession of revolutionary literature with conspiracy to overthrow the government. Similarly, the 1920s and 1930s were characterized by what Chris Bayly famously called “knowledge panic”, as local administrators across the country began competing in unearthing plots against “His Majesty’s Sovereignty over his Indian Dominion”.

It is this paranoid and violent apparatus of governance that the post-colonial states of India and Pakistan inherited in 1947. The tension between the ideas of republicanism and draconian state authoritarianism stems from the twin inheritance of anti-colonialism and the counter-revolutionary state. The republicanism that inspired both the Indian and Pakistani constitutionalism was underpinned by the reality of inheriting a state machinery that was designed to thwart any attempts at instituting popular sovereignty.

This tension explains why many liberal commentators remain perplexed at the incredible forms of violence perpetrated by the republican founding fathers. The debate often hinges on the personal beliefs of prominent characters in the freedom movement. But their personal dispositions are secondary to the strategic choices made by the subcontinent’s ruling elites. The most significant was the decision to pursue republicanism without uprooting the ills emanating from the social structure or dismantling the state logic that viewed the public with suspicion.

As such, the birth of the free nation coincided with the colonial management of populations along religious lines. While members of the constituent assembly in India were debating the lofty ideals of equality and fraternity, the Indian state was carrying out a massacre of peasants in Telangana (1949) who were daring to fight for these ideals in the country’s rural heartland. Similarly, soon after independence, the Pakistani state launched a crackdown on trade unions, students, and ethnic dissidents, eventually elevating the military to the “neutral arbitrator” in factional disputes among political elites, a role that the colonial authorities were most comfortable performing in the subcontinent.

Militarized Governance

In our brief genealogy, we witness how the logic of governance remains incongruent with the polite language of constitutionalism. This logic was not just forged under decades of foreign rule, but also represents the militarized control of our societies during the two world wars and the counter-revolutionary impetus of the inter-war period. In other words, war remains an essential technique of governance to manage populations across South Asia. This is not only true for the violent suppression of the people’s movement at independence, but continues to structure the relationship between citizens and the state today. It is most evident in relentless internal military operations, whether it is intended to occupy a territory (Kashmir) or to get access to mineral resources (Jharkand, Balochistan).

In fact, charging citizens as “seditious” points to the continuation of the war logic in the postcolonial state. Dissenting individuals are seen not as airing grievances against the government but as declaring war on the entire polity. They must be treated as enemies and removed from the legitimate political community. Sedition charges are thus used to identify and isolate certain individuals from the mass. The purpose of these allegations is not to target the individual but to produce a general effect of fear and paralysis in society.

It is worth noting that the charges of sedition still have little to do with any actual actionable plans for the overthrow of the government. Instead, they have recently been invoked against individuals for chanting slogans, writing columns, or giving speeches. Just like space is partitioned with barbed wires and check-posts during military conflicts, sedition laws aim to violently patrol the boundaries of acceptable speech and thought in the public sphere. They permit the functioning of managed democracies in which critical questioning of the status quo places individuals outside the framework of citizenship and portrays them as potential enemy combatants.

This war logic also explains the frequent invocation of foreign “threats” by postcolonial governments throughout South Asia. In particular, the Indian and Pakistani states invoke the other’s name as a mechanism for internally disciplining their populations. The charges against students and public intellectuals in India of being “ISI agents” demonstrate how anxious the Indian ruling elites are to delegitimize critical thinking (while inadvertently providing the ISI with a monopoly over intelligent discourse in India). Similarly, allegations of being “RAW agents” are hurled

across the political spectrum in Pakistan, making RAW appear as the most popular political party in the country.

Traitors of the World Unite!

A year after independence, the Communist Party of India released a now infamous pamphlet declaring, “Ye Azadi Jhooti Hai” [This is a false freedom]. The slogan became a rallying cry for an insurgent party announcing its intent to overthrow the Nehru government that had launched a brutal crackdown on peasants’ and workers’ organizations across the country. The uprising quickly collapsed, the membership of the Communist Party dwindled, and B.T. Ranadive (the Party’s General Secretary and architect of the radical line) was forced to resign from the party leadership.

Much has been written about the clumsy nature of the “Ranadive line” in 1948. Yet, despite strategic blunders, this position demonstrated a certain truth in identifying the relationship between the state and citizens in postcolonial India. The exit of the British after formal independence led to the loss of a historical referent which sustained anti-colonial struggles. Yet, Ranadive fully grasped that neither the absence of the colonial enemy nor the language of constitutionalism entails actual freedom for the people. The real problem to grapple with was the nature of the state that remained allied to imperialist interests and committed to governing under the militarized logic of late colonialism.

We have tragically failed to transcend this question even today. In Pakistan, we have a rentier state that acts like a landlord to lease out its land and labour to the highest bidder, be it capitalist America, “Communist” China, or “Islamic” Saudi Arabia. In India, the elites have violently thrust the country’s peasantry and indigenous populations into cruel forms of exploitation to appease global corporations. The situation reflects not just the arbitrary relationship between the people and the state, but also the deep incorporation of these postcolonial polities into the chaos of the contemporary imperialist system.

The widespread labeling of opponents as traitors shows that the counter-revolutionary tendency has become incompatible even with limited forms of democratic practice. As more and more ideas become incommensurable with the logic of governance, we are witnessing the emergence of an unbridgeable split in our societies. The cries of “Azadi” are beginning to reverberate across the region. The state and its lackeys are responding with the language of exclusion and violence. War is the unconscious principle of our contemporary present.

The allegations of “foreign agents” symbolizes this moment in which anything that exceeds the normative framework of power is deemed foreign. Liberal politeness is hopelessly inadequate to confront the aggressive reactionary onslaught that keeps transforming dissenters into traitors. If the Right is uniting behind the fear of phantoms, it is time the Left assumes its historical role of confronting the antagonisms that shape our defaulting present.

Only a force that can acknowledge the antagonism at the heart of our nation-states will be able to lead the fight for freedom that our societies yearn for. “Revolution” is the word that has historically mediated the dialectic between tyranny and freedom, the possible and impossible, the present and the absent. Today, we urgently need to rediscover the valence of the revolutionary tradition in the face of a cruel and punishing system. Much like the 1920s, it is the â€˜traitors’ who are keeping the notion of the People alive through their dissent and resistance. Perhaps, as a response to the global onslaught of the Far-Right, we need an internationalism of the traitors of the world. Those who will provide us the strength to defend popular sovereignty against the counter-revolutionary machine, and can allow us to redefine what it means to be patriotic in an era of pervasive authoritarianism.

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