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Pakistan

The terror of anti-terrorism

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The Anti-Terrorism Courts (ATCs) were established after promulgation of the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA) 1997, to fast-track cases against terrorists. In addition to terrorism, a range of other crimes such as arms trafficking, kidnapping, gang rape, sectarian violence, extortion, and target killings are also covered in the ATA. The parallel judicial infrastructure of the ATC under this Act was created for speedy justice. However, the track record of ATCs shows complete failure in awarding punishment to terrorists.

The conviction rate of terrorists in these courts is extremely low. They are often set free on the pretext of a lack of evidence whereas the state has been actively using ATCs to politically victimise human rights activists, who are seen as the real threat to the state and the status quo.

Most recently Baba Jan, a well-known activist and former Vice President of the Awami Workers Party, and 11 other activists from Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) were given life sentences by an ATC on September 25, 2014. Their crime was raising their voices for the rights of displaced people in GB. Baba Jan was leading the movement for victims of the Attabad Lake disaster caused by floods in 2010. The victims of this natural disaster were simply demanding the compensation that the government promised them. However, the government as usual faltered on its commitment and tried to suppress their voices by using violence and arresting activists. Two protesters were killed by the police. Compensation for flood victims is still being awaited. Baba Jan is greatly loved and trusted by people. He has the courage and conviction to challenge the establishment and the government.

Similarly in Faisalabad, loom workers Fazal Illahi, Akbar Kambo, Babar Shafique Randhwa, Rana Riaz and nine others were given life sentences because they were fighting for a minimum wage. Twenty activists of the Anjuman-e-Mazareen fighting for land rights in Okara were also convicted on criminal charges by an ATC. Trade union leader Ghulam Dastgir Mehboob who was leading an anti-privatisation campaign was also imprisoned and his case has been pending in the ATC since 2012. Trade union leaders of the Pakistan Telecommunication Company Limited (PTCL) Malik Maqbool, Hafiz Lutufullah, Emadul Hasan and 63 other PTCL workers faced charges of terrorism in the ATC in 2009 after protesting. Although the case was dismissed by the ATC, the PTCL trade union leadership was again arrested in 2010 under the ATA on similar charges as they continued to protest against the dismissal of workers. These cases make it obvious that this judicial mechanism was put in place by the state to provide legal cover for its illegal acts. The ATCs have unleashed terror against labourers, trade union leaders and social activists who challenge and expose the illegal acts of the state.

The state and private businesses constantly attack the rights of workers. Neo-liberal policies of privatisation, casualisation and informalisation of labour have played havoc with the lives of workers. Unemployment, unfair dismissals, victimisation of trade union leaders and low wages are bringing people on the streets to demand their rights. However, instead of responding to their legitimate demands, the federal and provincial governments are stifling their voices through the use of violence. The connecting thread between all of the above who are suffering from state repression is that they all belong to progressive, democratic, secular schools of thought and are not for sale.

The Pakistani state has gradually been captured by a military oligarchy collaborating with the neo-colonial bourgeoisie, the bureaucracy, and the feudal and capitalist classes. These classes thrive on the oppression and exploitation of the masses. Therefore any real threat to the status quo is perceived as a threat to their survival by the ruling classes and the state is very vigilant in this regard. It nips in the bud any political figure that will not compromise on principles or strike a deal with the establishment. That is why progressive leftist political forces in Pakistan have always faced the tyranny and repression of the state. Their leaders have been jailed, tortured or killed

to weaken their movement in Pakistan. In the face of state repression, progressive leftist forces cannot succeed in popularising an agenda amongst the masses.

The overdeveloped state apparatus of the military establishment has emerged as the country's key powerbroker. Therefore, they are extremely careful in choosing and developing their present and future political partners. They invest only in those political forces willing to play as junior partners, content with assuming formal authority without substantial power. The vicious attack of the state on the revolutionary leaders of people's movement by using the parallel judicial system of ATCs is condemnable. Through such acts of terror the state will further deepen its legitimacy crisis. The civil and military bureaucracy of GB must understand that the repression of people's rights may lead to a situation like that in Balochistan, which will not be in the interests of the country. The government of GB must take immediate action and release Baba Jan and other social activists who are implicated in fraudulent cases otherwise they must be ready to face the people's wrath, which will overthrow this system of exploitation and repression.

18 October 2014

ASIAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION - URGENT APPEALS PROGRAMME

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