

Voices from Pakistan: The Student Protests

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The war takes its root in words. No bullets have been fired at the protesters, the politicians, **or even at** the people who scurry away from conflict. But they are bombarded, carpet bombed, aerial bombed, with words. Words creep into a common dialect, a shared language of comprehension and struggle. The words you use will determine whether you win or lose.

The language of dictatorship is violent. It is confusing and oppressive because a person who feels that he is above logic, above criticism, and above any pressure from **externals** controls a state and by extension, the human capacities contained within it. It is a strange lie, to be taught of freedom and democracy, to know one's rights and to read the constitution and then to have none of it exist; to know that it is, at best, a metaphor.

My generation will be haunted by these years, and the intellectual traps we set for ourselves. We will live to regret our readiness to mimic a global hegemony, so that its language takes on a life of its own, beyond reason and justice. Terrorism, security, extremism. As a reporter working for an English language channel, I can safely say that the readiness with which we defend the need to "curb extremism," "fight terrorism" and "end corruption" have become more important than our freedoms.

We, the powerful, understand that this nation is being held hostage in a war that is larger than ourselves. Arguably, we *are* powerful by virtue of this consciousness. Assimilating official-speak automatically situates you closer to the apex of this hierarchy: and for those of us who wish to continue in silence, Business has gone on as Usual. Businesses aren't built on fundamental rights and freedoms. In Pakistan, businesses flourish under the magnanimity of

liberalisation of a government that doesn't have to concern itself with economic redistribution. And until recently, no institution in Pakistan, not even the law, could ease the day-to-day hell of industrial overcrowding, inflation and deprivation. So many people don't miss it, now that it's gone.

Every country has its own myths. Historians consider the concept of nationality in a post-colonial state a myth in itself. Pakistan's national myth has been one of defeat, of compliance, of self-deprecation and shame. We struggle to detach ourselves from the process of creating institutions because of the readiness of some **individuals - forces** both inside and outside the **country - to** co-opt, frustrate and destroy them. The end result therefore is not apathy, because apathy suggests a disconnect from a causal effect. Compliance can alternately be thought of as a means of coping with violence. It could also be a symptom of the well-grounded formula of aligning oneself with the powerful. Cultures where there is a high premium on suffering and fatalism are not accidents of history; they are formed by a lack of recourse to justice and an overwhelming dependence on patronage from those in power.

There are two parties in Pakistan that currently resist the temptation of patronage from a powerful actor. They are two parties that seem to be driven only by ideology, and who have chosen to take a personal stake in their ideologies. On the one hand are students, human rights activists and lawyers. On the other are the Taliban. The state is determined to crush both.

Discourse can be manipulated to take on meaning beyond what it intends to symbolise. Consider this: according to Musharraf, "terrorism" is a threat to the "security" of Pakistan. He refers to the attack on the former Prime Minister cavalcade on her return to the country. He therefore (we assume) refers to the security of 130 people who died of the attack, and the threat to the process of political articulation, of campaigning and activism. He responded by carrying out a wide-scale crackdown on political articulation and activism - both of political parties, and of non-aligned civil rights groups. His rationale is that the "country" and specifically its "national security" are more important than "democracy." This discourse is terrifying, because it indicates a powerful illogic, it finds comfort in

strangulation because at least the patient isn't breathing foul air. In setting up the dichotomy between "moderate" and "extremist" there is a clear choice presented: it calls for a sacrifice of institutions (i.e. democracy, civil liberties) for a process of elimination.

For those who've never had to struggle for a democratic ideal, it is easy to forget that every time we allow a person to simply suspend the law, we don't just take a few steps back, we raze the skeletal structure to its foundations. And we must start over, every time.

The brutal truth is that for Pakistanis, fighting terrorism isn't top priority. Unfortunately, this makes us sound like terrorists. Such is the power of words. The democratic ideal necessitates that we treat extremists as equals, and should they win a majority in any province, it is the duty of political parties to uphold the popular vote. Applying the term "terrorist" to a group of people eradicates any chance of understanding this movement as a political and historical one: it robs us of our most powerful tool, as human beings - that of reason.

Therefore, this isn't a clash between the state and trade unions and professionals. The imposition of emergency in Pakistan hasn't brought to the streets peasants and workers, and so far no political party has been able to take over the spontaneous mobilisation. Those taking to the streets are lawyers and judges, students and professors, journalists, human rights activists, and artists. This is a war on intelligence, it is a war on principles and ideals.

Finally, it is always interesting to look at the language of struggle. The Urdu word *azadi* is used widely in slogans that have been popularised by lawyers and journalists. The word isn't simply "freedom" in its hollow, individualistic sense. *Azadi* suggests the triumph of justice and accountability, of being held, irrevocably, to logic and truth. *Azadi* is a call for liberty; moreover it has been used as a collective call, emphasising its resonance: "you will have to give *us* . . . liberty; we won't rest until we get *our* . . . liberty". In as much as freedom can be confined (freedom *of* expression, freedom *of* the press), liberty is an absolute.