

## PAKISTANI DEMOCRACY AND PEASANTS OF OKARA

In an exclusive interview for the *The News on Sunday* (Dec 2002), Mohammad Shehzad interviews Dr. Pervez Amirali Hoodbhoy, professor of physics at Quaid-e-Azam University.

**MS:** General elections have been sanctioned by the military in October. There is a sizeable body of opinion that General Musharraf's 29 amendments to the Constitution have made these a sham. Do you agree, or do you instead see elections as a step forward for democracy in Pakistan?

**PAH:** Those amendments lack legitimacy but I'd much rather have elections than not. Whenever people are given a choice and asked to exercise their judgement, it is a step towards their empowerment. To be able to choose our leaders at the national level is important, but it's still more important for an elected leadership to exist at the local level. Else they become the victims of systematic abuse and exploitation. My visit to Okara city and its vicinity last week left me convinced of that.

**MS:** What took you to Okara?

**PAH:** As you know, there's a state of high tension over land issues between local peasants – numbering nearly one million – and the government. Many peasants have reportedly been killed, hundreds jailed without trial. Various government agencies – the Army Welfare Trust, Punjab Seed Corporation, and the livestock department – claim rights over some 70,000 acres of A-grade agricultural land. These agencies want to change the traditional tenancy (batai) system and institute a contract system instead. On the other hand, for two years these peasants have been demanding ownership to the land, arguing that they have tilled it for many generations. They feel that the new system is designed to lead to their eventual eviction under some pretext, such as being declared anti-state or failing to pay arrears. Much violence was reported in the national press, and widely broadcast over the internet. I wanted to see things for myself and make my own judgment.

**MS:** Who went with you? What did you see?

**PAH:** On the morning of 6 September my daughter and I went to several chaks (villages) around Okara. We began by heading towards Chak#45. On route we saw several groups of police deployed at crossings, and along the roadsides and canals. Rangers, armed with automatic weapons and light machine guns, were usually just behind the police. We saw local people being stopped at the various checkpoints but we were allowed to reach the village unhindered. It was a fairly typical village – mud covered huts, open drains, bare-footed children, and scrawny chickens – visible signs of poverty. We were directed by armed personnel to the village mosque. Just outside, under a big and shady tree, the Rangers had set up their headquarters for the day. There were about a hundred villagers standing in front of the soldiers, who sat around a small table with a pile of contract documents. The head of the Rangers force, Major Tahir, asked me my purpose for the visit. I explained that we had come from Islamabad to understand the situation.

**MS:** What was his attitude towards you?

**PAH:** Very polite and courteous. He asked us to sit down, and ordered refreshments for us. He spoke in English – this was to establish his credentials, and ours. People had been misled by the propaganda in the press, he said, and so he would be glad to explain the benefits of the new system. Then he switched over to Urdu, and gave a speech for 10 minutes. Under the new system, he declared, the villagers could contract the land for less than 50% of the market rate, and the government would build for them a school, hospital, and mosque. Pointing to the sheaf of signed papers on the desk, he said that the villagers had now understood these facts and most had signed the new contract. I saw a sea of expressionless faces all around me. So, when the major finished, I asked the villagers whether they had signed voluntarily signed – or, rather, put their thumbprints – on the contract document.

**MS:** And what was their reply?

**PAH:** With one voice they said that they had signed under duress. Then a babble of voices broke out, each detailing the threats and beatings they had received. So I then addressed the major and asked how his claim was to be reconciled with what I was hearing. He replied that there were some mischief mongers in this crowd, but others had signed willingly. Thereupon I asked the crowd if there was anyone there who had signed willingly. Again, a negative followed, with yet another outpouring of tales of woe. After another half-hour we got up to go. A crowd followed us to our car. An old peasant woman hobbled up to me, uncovered her head, and showed me a still bleeding wound that was turning septic. She pointed to the soldiers and said they had beaten her without respite. Others showed me bruises and marks on their bodies. The major was unmoved – he said these were old wounds, that no force had been used by the Rangers.

**MS:** Isn't it odd that these simple folk should have spoken up in the presence of armed Rangers? Were they not afraid?

**PAH:** They are terrified, but also desperate. Rightly or wrongly, they see this as a life and death struggle. They have no political agenda – just simple, physical, survival. For the peasant, land is livelihood. They see eviction down the line. But let me continue with our journey. We then went to another village, Chak#10, where we shown the fresh grave of a 20-year old man, Salman Masih, who the villagers claim was tortured to death by the Rangers. Then, as we were about to leave for Islamabad, some villagers came running to me and told us that a milkman and a farm labourer from Chak#9 had been picked up by the police. They pleaded us to save them. After considerable effort, we located these two men, who were in police custody. They were shivering with fear. I tried to secure their release but failed – I was told that they had been put into custody by the Rangers. That's when I decided that we should immediately go to Lahore, about 100 miles away, and meet with Major General Husain Mehdi, Director General of the Rangers.

**MS:** Wasn't that a long shot? It's not easy to see any one that high up surely!

**PAH:** General Mehdi was very gracious. He had left his office in the Rangers headquarters earlier in the day and it was dark by the time we found his impressive residence on The Mall.

Nevertheless, after I introduced myself and the purpose of my visit, he received us very cordially, offered chocolate cake and tea, and listened patiently as I told him of our experiences. I suspect that I tested his tolerance at times, especially when I told him about the beatings I had seen. He promised to have the two men in the Rangers custody released. However he insisted that we had an incorrect perspective, no violence had ever been used, Salman Masih had been killed by his own people to make the Rangers look bad, and that the peasants were willingly signing the contract documents. He accused the peasant leadership of swindling 70 million rupees, and said that the trouble-makers were NGOs and Indian agents. General Mehdi was completely forthright in his reply when I suggested that the issue of land ownership should be left for the courts to decide and not the Rangers. It is the Army's government, he said, and the government was the law. Therefore, by definition, it was not possible for the Rangers to do anything illegal.

**MS:** Are any of the political parties taking up the cause of the Okara peasants? If not, why not?

**PAH:** I have not followed the press on this, but my impression is that the political parties have given some vague statements in support of the peasants. But basically they are not interested because they don't see much political capital to be made from the situation. It shows their lack of interest in people's welfare. I am told that the district nazims, who were elected by the peasants, have resigned.

**MS:** Dr. Hoodbhoy, you gained a lot of enemies among your colleagues when you had successfully opposed the Quaid-e-Azam University Housing Scheme, wherein the university's land would have been made the private property of the teachers for a nominal sum. How then can you advocate ownership rights for the peasants of Okara? Is it not a violation of the principle that public land should not be turned over into private hands?

**PAH:** In 1996 what Dr Nayyar and I had opposed was the conversion of Quaid-e-Azam university land into private property, to be handed over to university teachers and Benazir Bhutto's political cronies. This would have quickly destroyed our university. Eventually land outside of the university campus was given to teachers and all is fine now. In my opinion poor peasants who have tilled the land for generations are far more deserving of land than we university teachers, not to speak of officers of the armed forces whose land holdings are considerable. One can make a strong case for land ownership by peasants. Countries like India, for example, give peasants ownership rights after 12-14 years of land occupancy. But, of course, one could argue the other way too – all state land obviously should not be privatised. So I don't have a definite position on this issue. The point, however, is that **land ownership issues should be decided by the courts through a process that gives a proper hearing to both sides. The Rangers, or the Army, do not have the moral or legal authority to decide upon such issues. The use of force is not legitimate in these circumstances. That is why we need strong democratic institutions capable of withstanding pressures from powerful groups such as the Army.**

**MS:** Given the size of peasant movement and the importance it has for the country, don't you think that a debate on TV at this occasion will be helpful on this issue?

**PAH:** Absolutely! But it will need a miracle to persuade PTV. Unfortunately, while the print media in Pakistan is reasonably fair and open, television is very strongly constrained. This is an enormous handicap for establishing democracy because valid information is vital for making sensible decisions. But on TV all we get is propaganda. Every government – civil or military – has used television for its narrow self-interests rather than a means of moving society forward.

**MS:** Is this why democracy has failed to develop roots in Pakistan?

**PAH:** It is a contributing factor, but there are much deeper failings. We saw the kleptocracies of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif. When they were removed from power, the people of this country did not move a finger to resist the army's illegal and unconstitutional move. Everyone was so fed up of thieves. But more importantly, it has yet to be realized that democracy is not just about electing rulers. **Democracy is predicated upon pluralism and the idea that all citizens should have equal rights. For democracy to succeed in Pakistan it will be necessary to accept that ours is a multicultural society with peoples of different cultures and faiths, all of whom merit equal respect. We cannot expect democracy within a legal system that de-jure and de-facto discriminates between citizens.** Tragically, fifty five years after partition there is still an enormous amount of confusion about democracy, what it means, and even whether we should have it at all. This confusion is similar to that which exist in most Islamic countries.

**MS:** But the religious parties are participating in the forthcoming elections. So why are you suggesting that there is confusion?

**PAH:** Twenty years ago at the time of General Zia-ul-Haq these very parties, and some of the same leaders, had insisted that democracy was incompatible with Islam. Today, the possibility of acquiring some amount of political power through elections has made them change their opinions. Nevertheless, they are hopelessly divided and confused about what Islam has to say about democracy in practical terms. Slogans like “Allah's Law on Allah's Earth”, or that the Quran be declared the constitution of Pakistan, or demanding a revival of the caliphate, is strong rhetoric but means little else. It leaves open all the fundamental questions – who shall govern and how, what shall be political and economic rights of citizens, and so forth.

**MS:** Would you say then say that the religious factor makes Pakistan a non-democracy?

**PAH:** I would not be so categorical. Although there is no model democracy anywhere in the Muslim world today, there are other countries – Tunisia, Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia are some examples – where democracy works a lot better than in Pakistan. The main reason for this is that these countries do not perceive themselves as in a state of perpetual war. However our conflict with India then creates the need for a very large standing military. This has enormous consequences for the nature of the state in Pakistan. It is easy to see that throughout Pakistan's history, whether it has been a period of “democracy” or otherwise, the military has wielded near absolute power. Kashmir, Afghanistan, nuclear policy, defence budgets – civilian governments have been irrelevant when it comes to making major decisions on such matters. This is fundamentally incompatible with the idea of a representative democracy.

**MS:** To conclude: what is your prognosis for the future of democracy in Pakistan?

**PAH:** The forthcoming elections will, at best, be only a very small step forward. Real power will remain concentrated with the Army. Nevertheless, the elections will allow new faces to emerge on the political landscape and this is a good thing. It is hard to say what the political landscape will look like 10 years later. However, if democracy is to ever exist in spirit then we will have to move away from the notion of being a nation under siege. We will have to move towards a rational and equitable sharing of power and resources, educate people into pluralism and tolerance, and prevent the poor – like those of Okara – from being crushed.