

Notes

Fighting Oppression and Injustice with Scholarship: The Life and Work of Feroz Ahmed

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Meeting Feroz

In the late 1960s the battle between the forces of oppression and freedom had reached a new world-wide crescendo. The unleashing of enormous military force by a superpower leading to horrendous atrocities of the Vietnam War, the obstinate survivals of colonial rule in new forms, and the rise of dictatorships in developing countries were being challenged by 'people power'. The battle lines were drawn not only in the jungles and hamlets of East Asia but also in the global arenas of pop culture, street rallies, print media, and the class rooms and lecture halls of the academia.

Those were the exciting times when I first encountered Feroz Ahmed indirectly. Although both of us had been active on the left of Pakistan's student politics at different times and at different places, I only came to know of Feroz in 1969 when I was teaching in Canada as a visiting professor.

Early that year I received an issue of the *Pakistan Student*, a publication of the Pakistan Students Association of America (PSAA). To my surprise, Feroze Ahmed, its new editor, had converted this social newsletter into several pages of serious political commentary on the affairs of Pakistan under the dictatorship of Field Marshal Ayub Khan, something that was hardly possible within Pakistan itself. This was a risky business even in the United States where the activities of the expatriates were being closely watched by agents of the Pakistan Embassy, and informers of the US State Department.

In any case, Feroz's association with this newsletter did not last long. In the 1970 convention of the PSAA held at the College Park campus of University of Maryland several bus loads of Pakistanis mysteriously appeared on the scene. Shouting patriotic and religious

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slogans they stormed the convention hall, took over the proceedings and ousted Feroz Ahmed from the editorship of the *Pakistan Student*.

The Pakistan Forum

This episode, however, proved counterproductive for the designs of its perpetrators, for soon thereafter Feroz launched an independent monthly magazine, the *Pakistan Forum*, a more substantial challenge to the Pakistani establishment and its reactionary allies. The *Forum* in its pages presented systematic and comprehensive critiques of global militarism and Pakistan's neo-colonial alliances with the United States in the form of bilateral and multilateral defense treaties. It also closely covered the popular struggles of national liberation being waged in Africa, Asia and Latin America normally blacked out in the mainstream media.

But this was not the kind of activity conducive to survival in the North American academia in those days, dominated as it was by conservative educationists with their own brand of political correctness. As a result Feroz found himself at the verge of losing his first full-time teaching position at the East Carolina University. In 1971, he moved to Canada's newly established Algoma University, along with his *Pakistan Forum*, the place where I had myself found refuge before him. In the relative freedom of this small institution located in a working class steel mill town, Feroz found a congenial environment among student activists and young faculty inspired by the movements of radical change that were raging everywhere in those days. They rallied around Feroz to learn from his extensive knowledge of world revolutions and revolutionary thinkers from Karl Marx to Rosa Luxemburg and from Mao Zedong to Amilkar Cabral.

On the secession of East Pakistan

Back in Pakistan the year 1971 came as a watershed in the country's brief but turbulent history. All the contradictions of a decade of military rule and the fallout from the so-called 'economic miracle' engineered by a group of Harvard University experts came to a head. The Ayub dictatorship fell under the onslaught of a popular uprising at the close of the decade of 1960s and the new military ruler, Gen. Yahya Khan, conceded to holding of elections on the basis of universal adult franchise for the first time since the creation of Pakistan. However, the results of the national election held in December 1970, in which the Awami League of East Bengal won an absolute majority, were not acceptable to the new regime. Instead of the transferring power to the elected majority, the regime launched a brutal military action in East Pakistan in March 1971. While many West Pakistanis at home and abroad lauded the use of

military force as a means of keeping the country together, Feroz immediately condemned it through the pages of *Pakistan Forum*, and a letter published in the *New York Times* upholding the right of the oppressed Bengali citizens to secede from the federation, the only option left open to them. He went even a step further and compiled a special publication entitled, *East Bengal: Roots of Genocide*, meticulously documenting the atrocities inflicted by the Pakistani army commanders on their fellow citizens of East Bengal.

After the traumatic events of 1971, Feroz began to feel strongly that he could be more effective in working for social justice and peace in Pakistan by returning to his homeland and communicating his ideas in the national languages understood more widely by the people. These feelings turned into a conviction and he left for Pakistan in 1975 with plans to publish his *Forum* in Urdu. In Pakistan it took him some time to find a university job, settle down, and complete all the official formalities of publishing periodical - awesome hurdles known to those of us who have lived and worked in Pakistan. Finally, the first issue of the Urdu *Forum* came out in November, 1977.

Urdu *Forum* and the Zia regime

Although this was by no means a great media event, Feroz in his characteristic thoughtful manner laid out the guiding principle of his publishing venture in the following words: 'Pakistan is a developing country, whose people have been struggling for their political, economic and spiritual freedom for a long time. To succeed in this struggle it is imperative to carefully research the causes of poverty, disease, illiteracy and injustice that prevail in this land; grasp the complexities of social change; analyze the flow of internal and external affairs; and steadfastly promote the values of democracy, justice and social equality. It is the responsibility of the press to present such analyses and critiques of national and international affairs in an objective, honest and scholarly (*alemana*) manner'. And then in words that would be the envy of a seasoned journalist, he beautifully summed up four 'fundamental prerequisites' of following his stated guidelines, '1. Deep concern and love for the country and its people. 2. Sound knowledge of social, economic and cultural issues. 3. Allegiance to the norms and ethics of journalism as a profession 4. Skills of effective writing and publishing'. (*Pakistan Forum*, November 1977).

Obviously, Feroz regarded his training and scholarship in demography, sociology and political economy as his best tool with which to fight oppression and social injustice. Yet, he never shied away from practical politics. He never allowed his higher education and academic

status to interfere with his political activism, ever ready to mix with people, speak their language and write in cheaply and readily available publications. In other words as a teacher he professed his profession in the real sense of the word with passion and right in the midst the people he cared for.

But those in power had other, more ruthlessly selfish political designs for Pakistan. With every issue of the new *Pakistan Forum*, the situation in the country was getting worse, more and more repressive. In order to perpetuate his regime Gen. Zia continued to issue a stream of draconian ordinances usurping the rights of workers, women and the minorities in the name of Islamization of Pakistan's politics and society. The constitution of the federation was being constantly mutilated through amendments by presidential ordinances, and a reign of terror was let loose in the form of public floggings, politically motivated imprisonments and torture in custody.

At the core of Gen. Zia's obsession was his compulsive drive to eliminate his prize prisoner Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the popular politician whom he finally got convicted and sentenced to death by manipulating the higher judiciary. Given that direct public expression of dissent was impossible, Feroz could not write openly that the court proceedings were rigged. Dissent had to be voiced in carefully crafted language employing euphemism and paraleipsis as one can find in the following comments on the Lahore High Court verdict in the April 1978 issue of the *Forum*.

In view of the contempt of court laws and the political situation in the country we will not comment on the fairness of the judicial proceedings. We will not say whether Bhutto's crime has been proven or not. We will not say whether the chief justice was biased or not; whether there was a political motive in trying the accused in the High Court instead of the court of original jurisdiction. Let the Supreme Court decide on these matters....

Writing in this guarded manner on sensitive issues, exposing Zia regime's repressive tactics as much as possible and campaigning for the return of democracy in Pakistan as best as possible, Feroz was able to continue the publication of his monthly journal for another year. Closer to 1979, the year Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was hanged, the Zia regime cast its net of repression ever more widely. Arrest and imprisonment of dissident journalists, politicians, and labour leaders became a daily affair. Mazhar Ali Khan the editor of *Viewpoint* was arrested along with the weekly's regular columnist Hussain Naqi for 'revealing state secrets'. The state police and armed youth of Jamaat-e-Islami intensified their terror against progressive university students and faculty. Restrictions on freedom of

speech were further reinforced. The *Pakistan Forum* and the *Viewpoint* began to appear with portions of their columns blackened by the censor's ink.

Under these circumstances Feroz thought that not much could be accomplished by continuing the publication of his gagged journal, and for a while he turned his attention to facilitate the formation of the political alliance, Movement for Restoration of Democracy (MRD). Shortly thereafter, in early 1980 he escaped to New York, dodging Gen. Zia's sleuths. While trying to make a living by teaching, research and consulting in New York City, Feroz continued to promote the cause of democracy and justice in Pakistan by working on several fronts. He commenced publication of a series of pamphlets on specialized topics concerning Pakistan's constitution, the nature of the state, political parties, labor movement, status of women, and the nationalist movements in Sindh and Balochistan. He organized a support group for Pakistan's MRD, and undertook a speaking tour of North America and Europe to promote awareness of the gross violations of human rights by the Zia regime (something that the powerful American government and media will not do for countries with friendly dictators).

Zia's brutal dictatorship finally ended in 1988 by a stroke of fate, if not by anything else. But this was just the end of another tragic era in the history of Pakistan, the rise and fall of another tin dictator who no doubt ruined many lives, trampled on the rights of the weak, ravaged the civil society and threw the albatross of Islamisation around Pakistan's neck, before meeting his demise by exploding 'mangoes' or something else in his US made C-30 plane.

Perspectives on Pakistan economy and politics

As a political economist Feroz believed that social injustice and oppression in Pakistan thrived on the policy of dependent development followed by successive governments which was essentially a continuation of the colonial system. In its neo-colonial relationship with the global capitalist economy and markets Pakistan had adopted a course of development which had sustained a class structure hardly capable of supporting strong democratic institutions. A weak and comprador capitalist class, a class of landlords and tribal chiefs, and an expanding middle class largely divorced from the productive sector of the economy were not the pillars on which the edifice of viable and equitable democracy could be built.

In an article in the last issue of the *Forum* (October 1979) Feroz correctly forewarned that unless there is a fundamental change in the course of Pakistan's dependent development strategy the country's

international standing will deteriorate, the international financial institutions (IFIs) will increase their meddling in the affairs of the country and the government will be forced to undertake emergency measures causing great hardship to the people. Needless to say that the Planning Commission of Pakistan has never deviated from the course of development advised by the American experts. Ten years later 'meddling' by the Washington based IFIs took the form of a lean and mean package of structural adjustments sold to Pakistan's establishment by the IMF and World Bank imposing backbreaking austerities on the working people, something that is now regarded as a normal reality of globalization.

On the political front, Feroz dealt extensively with two issues of great importance for peace and security of the people of Pakistan, one being the country's multi-national or multi-ethnic reality, and the other having to do with the dynamics of relations with Afghanistan, particularly since the Saur revolution of April 1978. Let us take the second issue first as it has landed the people of Pakistan into the quagmire of seemingly endless violence and insecurity.

Feroz welcomed the Saur revolution that took place in Afghanistan in April, 1978, ending the two hundred year old despotic rule of the Durrani family. But he also discerned immediately that crooked schemes were being hatched under the leadership of the United States to co-opt Zia's dictatorship to sabotage the Afghanistan revolution. In a wide-ranging article in the June 1978 issue of *Pakistan Forum* contextualizing Afghanistan's revolution in its history, culture and geopolitical realities, he warned Pakistan's leadership not to play in the hands of American imperialism and abstain from promoting 'jihad' and counter revolutionary activities across the western border. It is very likely, he wrote, that Pakistan's counterrevolutionary moves in Afghanistan will backfire and instead of gaining anything Pakistan will end up pay a heavy price. Had anyone in the position of power in Pakistan been listening to Feroz, the people of Pakistan and the region would have been spared the bloody chaos the country is in today.

Regarding the multi-national, multi-ethnic reality of Pakistan, I can still recall my first face -to-face meeting with Feroz some 40 years ago when he came for his job interview at Algoma University in Canada. When all the formalities of his visit were over and the two of us sat down in the dimly lit lounge of our mill town hotel he gave me a passionate lecture in his flawless Urdu on how the Muhajirs and the Punjabi establishment had reduced his fellow Sindhis into a minority in their own homeland. He surely sounded like a firebrand Sindhi nationalist at the time. But during our association over the years, I found his views on this

subject also go through his characteristic objective and scientific reasoning as a sociologist and demographer. His earlier analyses of relations between dominant and dominated groups in Pakistan were grounded in the nationality theory traceable to the classic texts of Stalin and Lenin. In his later writings he basically turned away from the use of the terms 'nations' and 'nationalities' in favour of the term ethnic and ethnicity to describe Pakistan's cultural, linguistic and regional pluralism.

Yet, whatever the terms used for Pakistan's cultural pluralism and disparities of political power and economic privilege, Feroz remained steadfast in his conviction that all culturally and linguistically distinct entities of Pakistan must have equal rights and opportunities to advance. Suppression of diversity in the name of national unity was not only a violation of human rights, but counter-productive to the aim of keeping the federation together. At the root of Pakistan's 'national' conflict, wrote Feroz, lies class division and class conflict. Therefore, the oppressed masses must seek class unity across national and ethnic boundaries and must not succumb to chauvinistic sentiments.

Conclusion

In this brief introduction to Feroz Ahmed's life and work I have only been able to scratch at the surface of his legacy as a thinker and political activist. He was indeed a prolific and quick-witted writer. Fortunately much of his political thought as a concerned scholar of Pakistan and world affairs is preserved, thanks to his wife and partner, Nadera Ahmed, who kept track of his writings in both the English and Urdu volumes of *Pakistan Forum* as well as in other publications. A compilation of these rich and diverse writings has recently been edited and published by Syed Jaffar Ahmed in a 727 page book, titled *Dr. Feroz Ahmed ke Mazamin* (Pakistan Study Centre, University of Karachi, 2009). His substantial contributions on Pakistan's national-ethnic conflict were compiled by Feroz himself before he died on 5 April 1997. It was published posthumously by Oxford University Press, Karachi in 1998 under the title *Ethnicity and Politics in Pakistan*. It is a must reading for all those who wish to understand the failure of the rulers of Pakistan to resolve this conflict, particularly in the case of Balochistan today.

To conclude, I have no hesitation in saying that if Pakistan is to grow into a secure and peaceful nation, the road to that future lies in revisiting the incisive writings of left intellectuals like Feroz and drawing from these writings the fundamentals of political and social policy for rebuilding a new Pakistan. I wonder how many of those who know of Feroz and his ideas also know that his dear wife, Nadera Ahmed donated

the family's life savings for the establishment of Dr. Feroz Ahmed Institute of Mass Communications, a centre of higher education in journalism at the University of Karachi. The imposing modernistic building of the institute is up, but initial reports of its functioning paint the usual picture of jockeying for power and control. However, I am confident that, whatever motivated the Karachi University authorities to build the physical infrastructure of an institute on the campus named after Feroz, they will not be able to stop his vision from taking control. It will not be very long before *Dr. Feroz Ahmed ke Mazamin* will be on the lips of young and old scholars within the precincts of the institute. Three cheers for Nadera.