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**To my dear friend Zain**

January 30, 2021 was a tragic day for those of us who lost a great friend, an upright human being, an avid reader and a Marxist thinker beyond excellence – our own Zainul Abedin.

Zain was a mentor and a thought leader, someone who posed some upsetting questions about the surreal nexus of power, politics, morality, culture and superstructure of the ideologies of hegemony and subjugation. His intellectual eccentricity was seen by many amongst the liberal and far-left tradition as a trademark of ivory tower intellectuals but he was the most effective mobilizer of socialist ideas.

From his university days in the 1990s, he could attract a number of young students towards scientific socialism. His articulation of ideas was so impressive that most of the young students – including myself – started to imitate Zain's way of expression of ideas in our classroom discussions. I was introduced to scientific socialism by him in our first meeting in March 1997 in Karachi University. I still remember the day Zain made an impression on my crude young mind.

It was March 1997 when a confident – and angry – man entered the main auditorium of the Arts Faculty of Karachi University just before the start of a seminar on the Indo-Pak peace process. The young man was thronged by inquisitive students who wanted to know his views before the speakers of the seminar could start their talks. In my first year of BA (Honors) in International Relations I was only three months old at Karachi University then. For a moment, I thought that the young man might be one of the speakers until I was told that he was a student. And it was not just students; some of the teachers from our department also started to inquire about the views of the young man about the possible outcomes of the peace process.

I was a bit surprised to see all this and I could not resist asking about this young fellow from my teacher professor Sikander Mehdi who was sitting next to me. Professor Sikander Mehdi told me that the charismatic young man was Zainul Abedin – the most learned fellow of the department of International Relations and a student of high intellectual caliber. Professor Mehdi said that there were two types of people who had surrounded the young man – ‘those who are afraid of him being outspoken and those who loved him for his knowledge.’ Those who were afraid of him were trying to persuade him not to raise some tough questions and polemical issues to mar the seminar. Those who loved him wanted to know the deeper issues which are generally skipped in these official seminars.

The seminar was much like those routine talks on current affairs, with little focus on the political history of the conflict between India and Pakistan. When the floor was opened for discussions, the young man was the first among the participants to offer an alternate but powerful perspective of the political economy of the Indo-Pak conflict. He provided a succinct political account of how the conflicts evolved in the postcolonial states, and with great eloquence he contextualized the peace process with historical references. His unique English accent and his powerful voice attracted everyone, and he spoke the minds and hearts of many of us.

The next day I decided to meet this inspiring man who outshined the dull speeches of senior academics of the seminar with his wit, intellectual vigor and articulation of argument. In the afternoon, I found the man lecturing a group of students in the corridor of my department. Without further ado, I went to him and introduced myself as a new entrant to the university. He welcomed me and with his unique smile invited me into his group – The Reasoners.

The Reasoners was considered an intellectual powerhouse of socialism at the campus and Zain commanded respect even among his ideological opponents for his integrity of thought and uprightness. It was through the platform of The Reasoners that Zain could knit together the loitering left-leaning young minds of the post-Soviet days of despair.

A number of young socialists grew under the banner of The Reasoners to build a strong base of intellectual contestation at the university. The Reasoners provided a common platform for those looking for a space for ideas ranging from a wide array of intellectual traditions – from staunch Marxists to existentialists to maverick poets. As a book lover, Zain played a leading role in bringing together all knowledge seekers – despite their ideological differences. In the claustrophobic academic ambience of Karachi University, which was dominated by fascist political groups, it was almost a miracle to have debates on subjects like existentialism, socialism and atheism in public.

In our classrooms in the 1990s, Left thinkers dominated discussions across various departments of social sciences. From the enlightening debates of Agha Abdul Sattar and Zahid Khan to the poetry of Imam Shamil, there were a number of rising stars of critical thinking who made some indelible imprints of intellectual contestation at campus.

In May 1998, we formed the International Socialist Group at the campus which included Dr Raiz Ahmed, Zain, Sartaj Khan, Mohammad Nadeem, Haroon Khalid and myself; it was expanded later to include a number of new members. Zain was the most educated among us all and continued to provide the thought leadership.

Zain did not hesitate to expose the hypocrisies of both advocates of liberal as well as religio-political tendencies; and so he had many foes. But even those who loathed him on ideological grounds could find no reason to question his love for the marginalized, the poor and the working class. Zain played Socrates’ gadfly with most of his friends to sting them into the intellectual sanity of socialism from the mundane life of individualism.

In the late 1990s, Zain was a popular name at the campus of Karachi University for his intellectual intrepidity, knowledge and his courage to speak truth to power. He became the icon of critical thinking and he championed secularism and progressive ideas at a time when Karachi University was dominated by rightwing thought police and militant student wings of religio-political parties. Zain was a student of International Relations at Karachi University from 1995 to 1999 and enjoyed a reputation as the most elegant speaker and outspoken thinker amongst his fellows and teachers. It was a time when Left politics was on the retreat due to the fall of the Berlin Wall and there was no appeal for socialist ideas but Zain could still build a strong intellectual case for the relevance of Marxism.

It was an untimely departure, my dear friend. You have ruined us all who found the light of wisdom because of you. You will be in our thoughts as a beacon of light and hope in our fight against an increasingly unequal world.

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