**Remembering Fazil Rahu**

[Mushtaq Rajpar](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/mushtaq-rajpar)

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Why do people become political? Why do they join political parties? What if parties do not exist? What forces them to join political activism?

The ;ives of many political figures show that in their early days, their activism is driven not by ideology or political manifestos, but by their experiences of injustice around them, seeing the resources, livelihood of people being taken away by force by those that are powerful.

One political hero in Sindhi society was Fazil Rahu (1934-1987). His activism went back to the 1950s and 1960s when the Kotri barrage in lower Sindh was constructed and barren lands were allotted to retired and in-service men, hailing from everywhere else but the area itself.

Fazil’s political life was spread over three decades; there were many movements when he stood out as the sole force of resistance. Essays, books and memories that his comrades have written following his assassination shed light on his political career. Gen Ayub, Yahya, Bhutto and Gen Zia, all put him behind bars for several years for his political struggle.

Fazil Rahu represented a true grassroots people’s movement. Any 20th century history of the people’s movement in Sindh cannot be complete without mentioning his role and sacrifices. Despite hailing from a small landlord family, he disowned his own landowner class, and associated, led and sacrificed for the peasant class. After Haider Bux Jatoi, Fazil was the second socialist leader who not only had an understanding of the class character of society, but who worked to liberate the peasantry and unite them.

During the 1977 elections, despite being in prison, Fazil decided to contest elections. Z A Bhutto had organized most local lords under the banner of his party, the PPP. The jail superintendent and the returning officer both tried to delay and deny Fazil’s submission of his electoral nomination form, but thousands of his supporters made their way and staged a sit-in outside the returning officer’s office, forcing him to accept the nomination. Fazil was contesting the election on the platform of the Sindh Hari Committee. Fazil’ss popular election campaign at a time when the PPP was prime caused panic in the ranks of local landlords, pirs and influentials. They saw it as the peasantry’s revolt against them. The man behind the bars lost the elections, but the worst was yet to come when Gen Zia took power.

Fazil Rahu represented defiance, and several occasions are reported by his comrades when he refused to toe theparty line. In the early days of the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD), Fazil was the senior vice president of the Awami National Party (ANP). The party refused to be part of the MRD, but Fazil mobilized people to be part of the historic struggle. To him, when the people were fighting fighting one of the cruelest dictatorships in the country’s history, they could not be left alone.

Supreme Court lawyer Qasim Mirjat, long-time political associate of Fazil Rahu, has quoted several watershed moments of his life in his autobiography. One of the historic contributions of Fazil was pushing the newly formed Awami National Party (ANP) to join the MRD. Fazil was the provincial head of the party in Sindh, and it was he who convinced Khan Abdul Wali Khan to join the MRD. A three-member delegation was appointed to attend the MRD meeting in Lahore. Ghulam Muhammad Bilour and Sardar Shaukat Ali (from Punjab) were to attend the meeting. Both committee members did not show up, and Fazil was accompanied by Professor Azizuddin Ahmad and Khalid Latif in the meeting. Maulana Fazlur Rehman objected to including the ANP in alliance. Fazil resisted and with the help of Nawabzada Nasarullah Khan, the ANP became a member of the MRD.

In the 1970s and onwards Fazil enjoyed the unwavering support and love of his native town’s people -- mainly because when oil and gas exploration companies took over the lands of his people, and they were being denied compensation, he stood for and with them. People in the area knew whom to look at for support; the tall and brave leader was always there. In times of crisis, pain and suffering, what matters most is not mere words of sympathy but practical action. An unquestionably honest character, everyone who worked with Fazil and saw him striving for peasant’s rights saw no contradictions in his words and actions.

Many of the key political figures in Sindh’s 20th century political history are remembered for their ideological leanings, or even being creators of political thought. Fazil is unique; he is remembered for his revolutionary grassroots work, his courageous stand against land auctions etc. Which actually means that, while others were putting out ideologies for an equal society, Fazil was out there defending the economic livelihood of the people, their resources and sources of living. He saw their very survival at stake had he not built a movement around those issues.

Fazil left an indelible mark of his sacrifice and passionate political struggle on the minds and hearts of his people. One such incident, often quoted by his comrades, is related to the party’s decision to open up a printing press in Hyderabad during Gen Zia’s days. Party workers were asked to contribute funds; at the end there was still a shortage of Rs25,000. Fazil sold off his wife’s jewelry so the party could have its own printing press. (Sadly, a couple of years back the printing press was sold as personal property by the person in whose name the party had registered the press).

On January 17, 1987, at dawn, Fazil Rahu was assassinated at the age of 53. For a short while, his loss was translated into a larger political movement, and hundreds of workers would march barefoot across the province to attend his anniversary. But within three years of his death, his party was broke into pieces, and his legacy lost to political opportunism. Thousands come every year to his last resting place in Rahuki, but this has become only a ritual, with empty promises and long meaningless speeches which do not make a difference in the lives of those he fought for all his life.

Mirjat wrote in his book that “Fazil was like a party himself; after his martyrdom with him his party’s major character was buried too”, and for many others the hope and the courage to stand up against power, an inspiration and faith in destination was lost. A people’s hero was killed twice, first by his killers and later by his political heirs and party. This is one explanation why the suffering of the people of Sindh does not end, why political oligarchies continue to dominate politics in Sindh -- because the real heroes of Sindh were eliminated.

Email: mush.rajpar@gmail.com

Twitter @mushrajpar