**Losing a defender of hope**

Dr Naazir Mahmood

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The writer holds a PhD from the University of Birmingham, UK and works in Islamabad.

Pakistan has only a handful of defenders of human rights and peace in this region; when you lose one, it is nothing short of a tragedy. Zaman Khan was one such indomitable activist and writer who gave strength to his colleagues, family, and friends.

He passed away in Faisalabad on Oct 22, 2021 at the age of 75, and with his departure the cause of human rights and peace has suffered a severe blow. Just when you think you need more influencers to involve the young generation in the drawn-out struggle for democracy and equality in the country, a senior fellow leaves you bereft and bereaved. In the current deteriorating situation of human rights in Pakistan you need many times more activists to spearhead the movement for equal rights, and here we are losing – one after another – our pillars of strength.

Zaman Khan started his activism early in life. It was under the first military dictator General Ayub Khan that democracy was being trampled and Zaman Khan joined a young crop of activists who were still students but had acute consciousness about political and social injustices in society. He was one of the founders of the National Students Organization (NSO) in the late 1960s. That was the era when the US was leading a relentless war in Vietnam and students around the world were staging protests.

Zaman Khan took active part in the antiwar movement in Punjab with his left-leaning friends. He often recalled that period when young progressive students kept in their hostel rooms, photos of anti-imperialist leaders such as Gamal Nasser, Ho Chi Minh, and Patrice Lumumba. By his mid-20s, Zaman Khan was already a well-known figure in the labour movement too. When his student days were over, he became one of the founders of the Joint Labour Action Committee in 1970. Transition from the 1960s to the 1970s was not smooth in Pakistan as the first general elections took place under the shadow of another military dictator General Yahya Khan.

At that time, there was a dynamic trade union movement and Zaman organised workers in many cities of Punjab. He often shared with his younger comrades his disappointment at the cool reaction of intellectuals and political parties in West Pakistan when a ruthless military action was raging in East Pakistan under the successive command of generals Tikka Khan and Niazi. Zaman was dejected at the lack of empathy in the people of West Pakistan – especially in Punjab – at that crucial juncture of Pakistan’s history which resulted in the breakup of the country.

He segued from trade union to active politics in 1973 when he became member of the central committee of the Mazdoor Kissan Party (MKP). It was one of the many left-wing political outfits which did not have wide mass support; still, the state considered them a major threat to the country's security. Z A Bhutto’s period was no better for the left-wing activists and leaders in Pakistan too. They barely managed to survive as political entities and many of them had pinned hopes in the National Awami Party (NAP) which was the largest progressive and secular political party with popular support especially in Balochistan and the NWFP (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa).

Zaman Khan was an eyewitness to the crackdown that the Bhutto government meted out to smaller parties, but the worse was still to come in the shape of Gen Ziaul Haq in 1977. As an active member of the MKP, Zaman was playing his role in the anti-Zia movement mobilised by a small cadre of activists. He was among those courageous cadres who courted arrest multiple times while participating in demonstrations for the restoration of democracy in Pakistan. In 1983, he received a one-year imprisonment and 50,000 rupees fine by one of the military courts set up under the martial law administration of Gen Zia.

There were dozens of military courts operating across Pakistan targeting all those who demanded an end to the brutal military rule of General Zia. The courts and punishments – lashes and rigorous labour during imprisonment – could not deter activists such as Zaman Khan. After his release from prison, he devoted more of his time to journalism, remaining the bureau chief of ‘The Muslim’ from 1984 to 1989. During that time, he was also a central committee member of the Awami National Party (ANP) which was a reincarnation of the NAP that the Bhutto government had banned in 1975.

Perhaps his best contribution was in the mid-1980s when he played an instrumental role as a co-founder of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) in Lahore. In the meantime, his journalistic pursuits continued with ‘The Frontier Post’ and ‘The Nation’ as bureau chief till the mid-1990s. One of the most challenging and life-threatening situations he faced was when he single-handedly took up the issue of the murder of Niamat Ahmer who was a Christian activist and poet killed in broad daylight in the education department in Faisalabad. He wrote extensively about it and received death threats from fundamentalist groups.

There are not many journalists who dare take up the issue of the misuse of the blasphemy laws and victimisation of minority groups. Zaman Khan was one of those who put their own life in danger to defend the marginalised in society. There are even fewer who talk about peace with neighbouring countries, and Zaman was again at the forefront of the peace movement in South Asia. Another organisation which he co-founded is the Pakistan-India People’s Forum for Peace and Democracy. I had the good fortune to make friends with Zaman Khan in this Forum and travelled to India multiple times promoting the cause of peace between India and Pakistan.

His progressive credentials were also evident in his work with the Progressive Writers Association (PWA). Since he possessed a broad intellectual base, he also became an active member of Halqa Arbab-e-Zauq which is one of the oldest and reputed literary organisations in Pakistan. Though he mostly wrote in English and Urdu, his love for his native language Punjabi had no bounds. The World Punjabi Congress elected him head of its NGOs wing. Zaman remained on the board of the HRCP for ten years and for another decade took part in the monitoring of elections.

His board membership of the HRCP ended in 1996 and then for 20 years he worked at the HRCP Secretariat till 2016, retiring at the age of 70. His commitment to human rights was such that he was ever ready to take part in fact-finding missions even in insecure and remote areas. Zaman’s untiring work earned him respect both nationally and internationally as Amnesty International invited him to be a member of its international fact-finding teams, including the one on extra-judicial killings in Nepal. He was a lifelong crusader for women’s rights too; being a father of three daughters and a son, he imparted his values to his next generation.

In the last decade of his life, he devoted more time to contributing articles on human rights and peace issues in which he vociferously condemned the arms race in South Asia. Compilations of his articles and the interviews he conducted have been published by Badalti Dunya Publications led by Ayub Malik and Azhar Mehmood in Islamabad. His books include: ‘Khuli Katchehri’ (Open Court), ‘Voices of Sanity’, and ‘Alternative Vision’ in which he compiled his interviews with prominent activists, intellectuals, journalists, and poets, mostly from South Asia. He left us when we needed him the most.

Email: mnazir1964@yahoo.co.uk