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**Have liberals failed us? Part - II**

To be fair, residents of DHA fully had the right to demand restitution. However, if they truly espoused liberal values of equality for all, their demands should ideally have been extended to the city as a whole. It is cases like this where we can witness the efforts of liberals in confined silos based on individual preference and class status.

Age and generation gaps are yet another dividing line that create a barrier for liberals to come together. Granted that the world has changed greatly over the last few decades, and a newer, younger liberal base has emerged. But it remains parallel to the older, existing liberal base who still hold the idea of a progressive, free Pakistan very close to their hearts. But often there is a tense standoff between the two because the expression and form of those ideas are different from those who rally to the liberal cause today.

Then there is also the dichotomy of those who struggle for their rights in rural Pakistan and are even more distanced from the fight for social change in other parts of the country. Such as the myriad of small farmer and village-based agrarian groups or fisherfolk forums. These groups get very limited attention in the urban centres of their districts, let alone the country. Are rural demands for rights to land, markets, education, health and social security not liberal values? And if so, are they specific only to those who live in rural areas and so not the concern of the urban liberal?

Similarly, the spate of protests that have been occurring during and as a result of the impact of Covid-19 on low-income workers, students and health professionals are another example of how we compartmentalize values and rights. The firing of daily wage earners by several wealthy industrialists at the start of the pandemic was an extreme violation of rights. The insistence of the PMC to hold its admission tests for thousands of applicants during the pandemic, was another. The demands of students in Waziristan for access to the internet so they could study online was yet another. These are all liberal values in action. But they took place in silos, rather than as part of a broader movement on labour rights, internet freedom or citizen protection.

While many urban, entitled English-speaking liberals (myself included) clearly write about and even stand up for all these issues, very few of us actually indulge in taking them forward (I stand guilty as well). That this article is being written in English, for an English publication and English-speaking audience, is also evidence of the fact that while we may be cognizant of the issues facing people across a range of spectrums, we refuse to come out of the bubbles we have created for ourselves. Hence, we continue to perpetuate dichotomies, which goes against what liberalism stands for.

This is why ‘liberal’ has become a dirty word in Pakistan, because we all think that our brand of liberalism is the right one. We prioritize our liberal values based on our personal preferences, not as a national cause. We only support the views of those who fall into our immediate ambit of liberalism (or social circles), but not anyone else’s. Granted not everyone can take up every cause everywhere. But there is a clear lack of solidarity and uniformity in how we express the causes we do take up.

Most street protests demanding social change have so far never been able to muster more than a few hundred people. The tens of thousands have been reserved for PDM demonstrations and religious rallies. That is not something that should make us question only the state. That should make us question ourselves. We are horrified by barbaric crimes being committed everyday but none of that brings us ‘liberals’ out onto the streets to demand change. And even those who do attend every protest and march have not been able to create a sustainable critical following. Not yet at least. Lasting change never did come from taking to only social media. Or from this article.

So, what do Pakistan’s liberals need to do to ensure the value of liberalism doesn’t die a fast death?

First, we must recognize that all of us, wherever we are in Pakistan, if we believe in rights and freedoms, are followers of liberal values. Creating silos will never get us anywhere. Nor will being overly-defensive about who we are, where we come from, if we are more liberal than others, or if we consider ourselves elite or not. If we believe in equality, rights and freedoms, then these questions are irrelevant.

We should instead be coming together on one platform more coherently and collectively, rather than dispersing our voices in a series of individual movements that are disconnected from each other. For instance, if women in Pakistan want their rights, then we need to somehow consolidate our efforts on a common platform where all women fighting for these rights in different contexts across the country can come together and formulate a plan of action (the efforts of Aurat March notwithstanding). With greater coherency of message, we could have and should have come together in Pakistan on the horrific rapes and sodomizing of five-year olds taking place across the country.

If students in under-privileged areas or public institutions want the state to improve the quality of and access to higher education, then those in urban private institutions must also make sure that they support them in this cause. This is the only way momentum and coherency can be achieved. Change at the level we are seeking, can only come from a physically vocal collective. Not an electronically vocal one.

We need to consolidate our liberal arguments and viewpoints across a vast spectrum and truly come together if we want positive social change in Pakistan. Otherwise, none of us deserve to call ourselves liberals. And, then, we will truly have failed Pakistan.

Concluded

The writer is an independent specialist and researcher in international development, social policy and global migration.