

The Dutch Connection

Pakistani NGOs networking in the Netherlands

Report >
South Asia

What could possibly be more distant from one another than Dutch policy and Pakistani's civil society arena? Neither a common colonial past nor any explicit economical or political agenda bind the two countries. How is it, then, that the Netherlands turn out to be one of the main nerve centres for the building of South Asian civil society networks. This article describes the preliminary stage of a two-year project that will be carried out in the Netherlands.

By Christèle Dedeant

The Institute of Social Studies (ISS, The Hague), the International Institute of Social History (IISH, Amsterdam), the South-South Exchange Program for Research on the History of Development (SEPHIS, Amsterdam), the Centre for Resource Studies for Development (CERES, Utrecht) and I could go on... The names of these institutes or programmes were thrown at me repeatedly in Karachi, Lahore or Peshawar during my PhD fieldwork on Women's movements in Pakistan. Bit by bit, the Dutch connection started to take shape. A considerable number of Pakistani women activists, trade unionists and development experts – most of whom can be loosely associated with the traditional Left and Left-of-Centre of Pakistani politics – have been working or studying in the Netherlands and/or have had some links with various Dutch civil society institutions and non-governmental organizations.

Historical Background

The trend started in the late seventies when Pakistani politics reverted to yet another period of military rule under the dictatorship of General Zia ul-Haq (1977-1988). Condemning to death previous Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto after a parody of a trial (1979) and eroding women and minorities' rights that were willy-nilly safeguarded by the previous governments, Zia ul-Haq's decade of Islamic military rule eradicated the very notion of democratic pluralism. Putting forward the view that the ummah should not include any divisions at its heart, he intensified censorship of the press, banned parties from the political arena and excluded student and labour unions.

Most of the reputedly progressive or leftist Pakistani organisations (Pak-

istan People's Party, National Front for Liberation, Awami National Party, etc.) branched out to the Netherlands. As a matter of fact, following the city of London, where Benazir Bhutto fled to self-exile up to 1986, by the mid-eighties Amsterdam had become one of the main European centres for Pakistani political activities. It is no coincidence then that the most impressive archives ever collected on leftist movements in Pakistan are to be found at IISH in Amsterdam. Considering the hazards faced by the Pakistani leftist activists (the Communist Party has been officially banned since 1954), the IISH - founded in 1935 with the objective of gathering and conserving the memory of the Leftist movement all over the world - was considered a much safer place.

After the return to democracy when Benazir Bhutto was elected as Prime minister in 1988, many opponents to the regime returned to Pakistan, but the Dutch connection remained operative. Even if the Netherlands does not host as many leftist political refugees as it did in the '80s, many activists and civil society entrepreneurs are still linked to the country through numerous institutions. The aforementioned ISS (founded in 1952) is one of them: offering postgraduate education in development studies to mid-career professionals (PhD, Master, and Diploma levels). The institute welcomed and trained over the last decade an ever-growing number of Pakistani 'scholarly practitioners' who joined the booming NGO arena in the '90s.

Interestingly, it is often in these Dutch programmes or seminars that Pakistani NGO activists have the opportunity to meet their counterparts from other developing countries (The ISS, for example, welcomed students from 160 nations) including the South Asian region itself. As such, the Sephis programme (funded by the Nether-

lands Ministry of Development Cooperation since 1994) which supports the production of non-statist histories stands out as another interesting example. In a part of the world that has experienced a number of violent and traumatic divisions and which has geographical and mental borders that are tightly controlled (particularly those between Pakistan and India), this outside incentive for creating links and/or producing an alternative historiography is vital.

The Kiss of Death

In the next two years, a cluster of questions concerning Dutch policy will have to be addressed. Both historical and sociological factors have to be taken into consideration, such as the role of different Dutch actors (such as NGOs, local social movements, foundations, media, churches, trade unions, parts of intergovernmental organizations, and parts of the executive branches of government). The role and methodology of the semi-public Dutch co-funding agency, the Netherlands Organization for International Development Cooperation (NOVIB), a major player in the development cooperation field that was set up after the Second World War in 1956, is of primary importance. Related to this are questions into the focus and aim of these aid and assistance programmes as well as into the political, ideological and economical underpinnings of Dutch foreign policy in this regard.

Centred on the broad question of the relationship between the transnational system and the actors involved, the research will in its next stage focus on the personal trajectories of the activists themselves. Many of the senior coordinators or programme executives to Pakistani NGOs were actually actively committed to Leftist politics during the '70s (during the Baluchistan uprising for instance) and '80s (in the Move-

ment for the Restoration of Democracy). The NGO arena, often labelled as the 'kiss of death' for the vitality of the leftist opposition, was and is seen as a protective umbrella against possible persecution or further marginalization. These ambiguous feelings towards what is usually regarded as the backbone of civil society building is certainly not without consequence on the relationship between the donors and the NGO activists. It is indeed interesting to note that cross-border cooperation is most likely to occur in areas of broad, non-partisan importance: the environment, women's issues, education, water issues, population, disarmament, arts and cultural exchange, etc. Therefore, what needs to be studied is the ways through which various actors -NGOs, CSOs and institutes- interact, form loose instrumental coalitions and partnerships and, at times, diverge.

The response of the state is also crucial. In times of conflict over domestic or international issues (women's rights and nuclear threat, for example.), NGOs activists, backed up by their donors or their foreign supporters, 'tend to bypass their state and directly search out international allies to bring pressure from outside' (Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, 1998:12). This 'boomerang pattern of influence' has proven to be received with mixed feelings in Pakistan. The response was damaging at times like when the government of Nawaz Sharif (1997-1999) launched an acrimonious campaign against women activists and peace activists, labelling them 'agents of their foreign masters'. At other times it is fruitful, like when the state seems to co-opt part of the activists' discourse. Admittedly, the triangular relationship between the state, NGOs, and their foreign allies may allow the Pakistani government to strategically locate itself vis-à-vis other local and/or regional demands over certain issues. The Indo-Pakistani issue is a good example where such parallel diplomacy can be exploited by a power that may not be able to dispense with his belligerent rhetoric officially.

Fifth Column Fears

That leads us to the last set of questions concerning the South Asian dimension. What needs to be studied in depth are the ways through which South Asian NGOs activists' links with third-party country like the Netherlands allow them to concentrate on matters on bilateral/multilateral importance which facilitates cooperation despite the political differences between their governments and states. As mentioned earlier, the most common refrain directed at local NGOs in many developing countries like Pakistan is that they serve as a 'fifth column' that actually promotes the interests of their external donors and allies. This accusation of impinging the sovereignty of the state has been the most convenient way to dismiss the work done by such NGOs. Does this 'soft subversion of territoriality' outside the South Asian context provide a solid framework and

foundation for future cross-border cooperation along depoliticized lines?

We take for granted that the formation of such transnational networks and bilateral/multilateral ties should not be seen as simple forms of cultural transfer (i.e. the transfer of 'Western agendas and values' to non-Western societies via non-conventional means). We obviously do not view the Pakistani NGOs as passive recipients of 'foreign' ideology or values. Rather one should look at such networks and linkages in terms of cross-cultural exchange, where they form a third space where inter-cultural dialogue can take place meaningfully.

Such networks also allow actors and activists from various countries to bypass what would be severe political restrictions that get in the way of South-South cooperation. By using the networks and linkages established abroad, Pakistani activists have been able to open up forums for dialogue on issues like peace and disarmament between countries like India and Pakistan, whose governments remain at odds with each other. The relatively open policy of the Dutch government in this respect has helped to encourage such networking and cooperation. The Netherlands are also seen as a 'neutral' country thanks to its comparatively benevolent foreign policy abroad, and for that reason it does not carry the burden of stigma that is attached to other countries like the United States of America, whose own image abroad has been compromised due to its foreign policy initiatives. <

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