

TERRAVIVA

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The End of the Polycentric WSF

WHAT COMES NEXT

The Road to Nairobi 2007



Many things did not work here in Karachi over the last few days. Meetings started late, were cancelled or changed venue; garbage was strewn all over the place and trash bins nowhere to be found. Just getting into Pakistan was a nightmare and, to some, just impossible.

Yet this was not what mattered. In the end, what mattered was the visible joy over the discovery that “we” from Punjab, Balochistan or Kashmir, “we” from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, India or the Philippines, are more or less all the same. “I saw humble people, workers from far-away parts of Pakistan, discussing their issues, trying to understand each other’s language. There were no intellectuals there. That sight made me feel that all this effort made sense,” Fahim Zaman, a former mayor of Karachi and member of the organising committee, told TerraViva.

This feeling takes us back to the first WSF in Porto Alegre, Brazil in January 2001, when some 10,000 people heeded the call to organise a counterpunch to the all-mighty World Economic Forum. Like here, the atmosphere was a mix of serious discussion and political carnival.

However, the question that hangs at the end of the three-legged Polycentric WSF 2006 is what comes next. While the WSF is no longer a yearly festival of political losers, neither is it anything else yet. Fica

As WSF draws to a close, it’s time to take stock of where the Forum is, this year’s polycentric approach and Karachi’s legacy. Whatever shape the WSF takes from here, it remains a hub for political thinking.

A new creature is coming to a new creature is coming to being but is not yet born. Some believe the WSF should stay as it is: a place for exchanging ideas, and, why not, a festival, as International Council member Joel Suárez, from Cuba, told TerraViva in Caracas, or a global organised political force, as Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez called for in front of 20,000 cheering demonstrators in January.

The political atmosphere has changed since the first Forum. Back then, in Latin America, only Venezuela had a government that could more or less identify with the WSF’s aims. Today, this is the case also in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile

and Uruguay, and in the next few months, possibly Ecuador, México and Perú.

Pakistani activist and author Tariq Ali thinks Latin America is not as far away from Asia as it seems. He proposed Venezuela as a model to stop the vicious cycle of corrupt politics and military dictatorships in Pakistan. But he lashed out — hard — at the core of WSF: NGOs, which he said keep people away from politics.

To Zaman, the Karachi forum is strictly political: “One of the reasons we insisted on this city is because there is a U.S.-backed military dictatorship right now, because Karachi is a beautiful city many times raped.” In spite of the city’s image as a violent area, foreigners feel the kindness of its people.

WSF 2005 cost 4 million U.S. dollars, while Caracas in January 2006 had eight million dollars and Bamako, 2.5 million dollars. These are in sharp contrast to the meagre 250,000 dollars that the Pakistani organising committee managed to raise after the Oct. 8, 2005 earthquake. Conspicuous has been the absence in Karachi of WSF’s most renowned “celebrities” and, as Zaman notes — “I’m not complaining” — the failure of WSF’s International Council to respond to Karachi’s calls for help in fundraising.

The forums in Bamako, Mali and Karachi were different from Caracas

because they were foundational, as much as Mumbai in 2004 was. This year’s WSF has been a tough experience, leaving many to think that holding a “polycentric” meeting was not such a good idea after all. But then again, “global” gatherings are becoming nightmarish from the logistical points of view, ineffective politically, and not really global.

“It might have taken away some of the glory of the central event, like Porto Alegre or Mumbai, but it has given grassroots organisations the opportunity to participate,” Zaman said of WSF decentralisation. “This is not about Noam Chomsky or Naomi Klein.”

The WSF, without a structure, has never followed a plan. Perhaps Nairobi, next January, will be the last global WSF, and the “movement” will then redefine itself. Already, sectorial, regional and national forums, such as the Global Forums on Education, Free Software, Borders, Migration, Peace, among others, are taking place this year.

The WSF, whatever shape it takes, is no replacement for political action. But it remains a platform for political thinking and coordination. Among its challenges is how to keep its relative independence — if this ever existed in the first place — and how to include the destitute masses. Only they can make another (better) world possible.

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Making space for alternative media

Pulled by the corporate sector on the one side and the state on the other, the Pakistani press, has just begun to enjoy its newfound freedom. Some say that the time is just right to bring about a 'parallel' or 'alternative' media, but others are a bit wary.

By Zofeen T. Ebrahim

"The easy way probably of defining 'alternative media' is to say it's neither the CNN's or the BBC's approach," is how Johanna Son, director for Asia-Pacific of Inter Press Service (IPS) news agency, began to define the somewhat "hazy" term. But "sometimes it's easier to define what it isn't than what it is," she explained, speaking at the seminar 'An Alternative Media World is Possible' organised by the World Social Forum in collaboration with IPS.

IPS, created in 1964, specialises on the coverage of issues relevant to the developing world, working with developing-country journalists and undertaking training in regions like the Asia-Pacific

"It's our belief that we should try to get across those voices that are not always heard, as opposed to those big names who get ample coverage," she said, not just government ministers or diplomats but also voices of protests and social movements, like the World Social Forum. At the same time, she added, media organisations do not always find it easy to survive in the cut-throat world of mainstream media conglomerates.

Sheen Farrukh of the Inter Press Communication, a Pakistan-based



Johanna Son, Director, IPS Asia-Pacific

media group, emphasised the need to "set up a parallel media network in South Asia, to break the monopoly of pro-establishment and pro-corporate sector." Imran Shirvanee, of the same group, began by arguing whether there was a space for it in the region, where electronic media is more popular than print due to a low literacy rate.

But "we have to begin by creating a niche for alternative media within the mainstream before we can even think of starting off independently," said Mazhar Arif, executive director of the Islamabad-based Society for Alternative Media and Research. He said the focus should be on "monitoring media content".

The scorecard on pro-people issues is dismal, Arif said. "In July

2005, we sifted through the largest and most widely Urdu daily, Jang, and found that on its first page there were almost 1,548 cm/column space used for government statements, 2,040 cm/column for advertisements and only 18 cm/column on issues that included health, water, gender, education etc."

It is important is to complement the people's movements with the mass media so they can support each other. "Right now, people in our country really don't know what alternative media is all about," Arif added.

Son explained that doing alternative media does not mean letting go of professional journalistic standards. "The basic principles of balance and fairness have to be adhered to, because credibility is important for any media, alternative or not."

Keep Off Our Lands

By Stanislaus Jude Chan

"Nothing can happen that is worse," says Jamal Jamu of the Palestinian Grassroots Anti-apartheid War Campaign, "than waking up and finding that your house does not exist anymore, that your people have been driven out from the farms, from the factories, from their houses, and scattered elsewhere in the world."

"Trade unionists resisting the privatisation of Iraqi oil resources are here in spirit," says Cuhiva, an Iraqi woman from Voices In The Wilderness, a group campaigning for social justice.

"Iraq had faced the harshest and hardest sanctions on education, healthcare, infrastructure ever imposed in the world even before 2003. Even before the occupation, Iraq was already a damaged country," says Nadia Mohammad, an Iraqi studying in London.

Today, after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2004, "It is so dangerous that everyday when we leave the house, we say goodbye like we will never see each other again," Nadia shares.

"Unemployment rates in Iraq increased to 60 percent because people are scared to leave their houses to go to work. We used to be proud of its stand on equal opportunities for men and women in Iraq. But now, top women lawyers, doctors, high-ranking executives are sitting at home and not using their brains because they are scared to leave the house," Nadia added.

But the Iraqi people are determined to get back on track by urging trade unions to "show solidarity", as well as counting on "smaller grassroots groups to be set up in other countries, maybe even in Pakistan".

"The US and its allies have been changing Iraqis, from being one of the richest people in the world, to now where they cannot even afford gas for their cars," Jamal says. "Human rights for a person in Iraq, a person in Palestine, or a person anywhere in the world must be the same as human rights for the people in America and Europe. Otherwise it is not human rights, but dehumanisation."

Jamal quotes a popular saying in Palestine: "If you live, live free. Or stand aside like the trees."

Muslim Countries Can't Blame the West

The decline of Islamic states can be linked to their treatment non-Muslims as second-class citizens, so it's time to encourage them to be democratic modern states, says Pakistani-born journalist Tarek Fatah.

By Roop Chintamani

“Muslim countries, by their very nature, cease to take the first step toward creating a democratic modern state because their citizenship is based on inherited race and religion,” says Tarek Fatah, a Pakistani-born journalist who speaks boldly on how state and religion are separate entities — and why the difference needs to be maintained.

“Take the example of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Iran, where citizens other than Muslims are treated as second-class citizens. In Pakistan, the blasphemy law puts innocent people in jails (who) are even sentenced to death. In Saudi Arabia, the constitution determines the citizenship and a Christian cannot be a Saudi national,” points out the Toronto-based Fatah, also with the Muslim Canadian Congress and host of the Canadian TV show ‘The Muslim Chronicle’.

He argues that the word ‘minority’ should be erased from the Pakistan constitution and that the status of a person’s citizenship need not be determined by the faith one is born in.



Tarek Fatah: A strong voice against religious states

This, he says, is the basic reason for the decline of most Islamic states. “All successful democratic nations are constructed on the premise that citizenship be based on human-created laws, which the parliament can change. Islamic nations, on the other hand, base it on the divine laws which cannot be debated in parliament and are considered immutable. By its very nature, the rest of the people who do not believe in Islam become second-class citizens.”

His views are echoed by Ayaz Palejo, an intellectual and a Sindhi nationalist who believes that citizenship laws and constitution are based on injustice and are thus bound to breed bias and prejudice.

Fatah feels that the basic reason for prejudice and bias stems from the absence of equality in society, seen in the treatment of women.

Fatah says western forces cannot be blamed for the problems that Islamic nations face. “We need to reduce hatred amongst ourselves.” He quoted examples of how Iraq and Iran – both Islamic states – went to war. He also spoke of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the way that Kurdistan has been dominated for long (by the central government).

“It’s like we are in a car rally with our eyes fixated on the rear view mirror,” Fatah explains. “Obviously when you’re looking into the rear view mirror you tend to lose track of what’s in front of you and bump into obstacles. When this happens we blame western imperialism and Jews of putting those obstacles in our way. But the fact is to win, while we look at the rear-view mirror every now and then to keep our perspective, we should be looking ahead as well.”

BALOCH CONFLICT

By Sumera S Naqvi

The Right to Self-determination

The military rulers walk the tight line of making or breaking the province of Balochistan, Pakistan’s largest but poorest.

Inside the tent of the eating area at the WSF sit a few hefty boys in white shalwar khameez, feeling a little out of place. They are with the Balochistan Students Federation, and an odd melancholy reflects their faces. “My friend disappeared a few months back and since then we haven’t heard of him,” narrates one of them. “His father worked hard as clerk in a government office to earn enough to put him through college. He now sits here at the WSF venue in a hunger strike on the vague hope that his son can return.”

His son is not the only one to have disappeared. Abductions have been on the rise in past months.

“The conflict in Balochistan today is about our national resources, land, recognition of our right to self-determination and our freedom which the military rulers in Islamabad tends to colour differently to stigmatise the Balochi people,” says Haleem Baloch, a member of the Baloch Students Federation.

The conflict has been brewing ever since the partition between India and Pakistan. Balochistan, the largest but one of the poorest provinces of Pakistan, has a landmass of 42 per cent of the country’s. Nearly 45 percent of its people live below poverty line, although the province is replete with energy and natural resources. According to the ISN Security Watch, Balochistan’s gas reserves in the province account for 1.4 billion U.S. dollars annually in revenues but gets only 116 million dollars in royalties.

In the guise of the U.S.-led ‘war on terror’ that pushes Pakistan to clamp down on insurgencies in search of al-

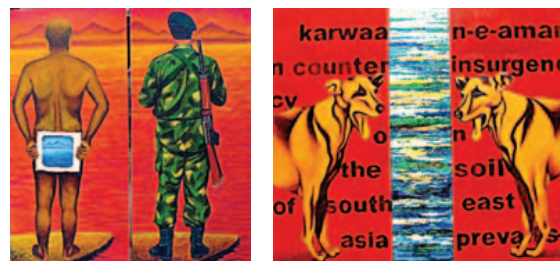


Qaeda, the conflict has become gruesome — the chief of the Jamhoori Watan party, Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti, has declared that the Pakistan army has been “committing genocide upon its people”.

Violence has escalated with the blowing up of gas reserves in the Baloch areas. The area under Bugti accounts for around 40 percent of total gas reserves.

KASHMIR

War Teaches



By Zofeen T Ebrahim

Tough Lessons

Once you're in Jammu & Kashmir, it's very hard to remain just an observer, as Sonia Jabbar, a young fire-brand Indian journalist from the region, says. Also a human rights activist, she has been chronicling the domino effect the conflict has had on the various actors of civil society.

Having witnessed bloodshed, gunshots, rights violations, excesses on women and children on a routine basis, she very enthusiastically worked to bring together 11 Kashmiri leaders to Pakistan to hold various debates, "clarify causes of rifts between India and Pakistan", and dialogue "with ordinary people" to "clarify misunderstandings" on the Kashmir issue during the World Social Forum.

The meeting "to talk freely and openly" with citizens of Karachi in a "closed environment" was scheduled for Mar. 27 in a venue outside the WSF site. To the speakers' utter shock, they walked into an empty hall. "Is no one in Karachi interested in resolving the Kashmir issue?" asked an irate Jabbar, chairing that session titled 'Human Rights For All'.

Undeterred, she rescheduled the meeting to the next day, Mar. 28. This time, the event took place in a smallish area with at least a handful of an audience. The speakers included Balraj Puri, a veteran journalist and a human rights activist; Veer Munshi, an artist; Ahmed Ali Fayyaz, bureau chief of

How does civil society cope when human rights violations take place in the conflict-riddled Kashmir region? For both media and the arts, the space for expression shrinks. It becomes increasingly difficult to serve and survive.

'Daily Excelsior'; and Anuradha Bhasin Jamwala, chief editor of the 'Kashmir Times'.

Giving a Powerpoint presentation of his paintings, called 'Moods of Kashmir', Munshi spoke about how he needs to breathe freely amid the shrinking cultural space. Jamwala talked about the oppression of the Kashmiri women, their activism, and how they transcend their grief and create space in the public space.

But it was Balraj Puri, a veteran journalist, who stole the show. He has been

protesting against violations whether "these are carried out by militants in the name of freedom fight, or by security forces in national interest" or the killings in the name of the U.S.-coined 'collateral damage' since the day mass insurgency started in 1989 in the valley.

"The security forces did a house-to-house search and when the people gathered to protest, they were fired upon in which some 30-40 innocent people died. I went to each and every Muslim home to pay my condolence. At the same time I appealed to the militants to show restraint when mass killings on Hindus and Sikhs began just because they were non-Muslims."

Since then, his stance has remained. He protests whenever a killing takes place. Over time, he said, the mass insurgency took on a militant role that has now turned to terrorism and there are no longer any rules in the game.

However, said Puri, people have realised that violence has been counter-productive and could destroy the last remnants of Kashmiri culture and heritage. The decision by Yasmin Malik, once a militant leader, to put down the gun after 16 years and resort to peaceful, "more patient" means of attaining an independent Kashmir is perhaps a case in point.

Ahmed Ali Fayyaz, bureau chief of the 'Daily Excelsior', spoke of the media's difficulties in reporting 'reality' in the conflict-torn region, where every

word seems to have multiple meanings.

"Media were free till the early 1990s and then unprecedented change took place. It became difficult to report truth because truth took on different shapes. Sometimes your writings become coloured, have certain leanings and this may happen unconsciously as well as consciously," Fayyaz explained.

"Take the word 'security force' and ask people what it means to them," he continued. "Literally speaking, it means troops that protect. But people may say the term refers to 'those who protect us from the guns' while others see them as troops who are 'insensitive to human life'. In the same manner, 'conflict' may variously be 'strife', 'militancy', 'insurgency', 'turbulence', 'turmoil', 'freedom movement', 'terrorism' or even 'jihad'. Under the circumstances, it becomes difficult to appease everyone and reality remains somewhere in between."

While personal threats to journalists have been reduced considerably, others have taken over. "We, too, have our share of embedded media, both with the militants as well as the Indian establishment," he added. We can write anything, print anything and get away with it and there is no accountability. In the process, the institution of journalism is getting discredited. I don't call this freedom of expression. Freedom without accountability is definitely not democracy."

Trapped by WTO

By Stanislaus Jude Chan

“More than 30,000 farmers from India have committed suicide over the last five years!” says one participant at a Monday discussion on the post-Hong Kong World Trade Organisation (WTO) ministerial summit. Yet another claims that the total figure of self-inflicted deaths of poor farmers in South Asia stands at “more than 2.5 million” to date.

Whatever the real figure, one thing is clear, the speakers said — poor, developing countries are receiving the short end of the stick with WTO agreements — or rather, non-agreements — and are frustrated to death — in some cases, literally.

The US and the Bush administration has used free trade agreements as a “forced trade agreement” and “fast track authority” in its own favour, while disregarding the interests of poorer countries in its WTO negotiations, says Abid Suleri, assistant

The US and the Bush administration has used free trade agreements as a “forced trade agreement” and “fast track authority” in its own favour, while disregarding the interests of poorer countries in its WTO negotiations

executive director of Pakistani NGO Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Islamabad (SDPI).

In agriculture — among the most contentious issues due to resistance of developed country markets to the entry of products from agriculture-producing countries — as well as other industries such as textiles, there is much unease over the United States and European Union’s employment of protectionist policies on imports while they demand

the liberalisation and “opening up” of poor countries.

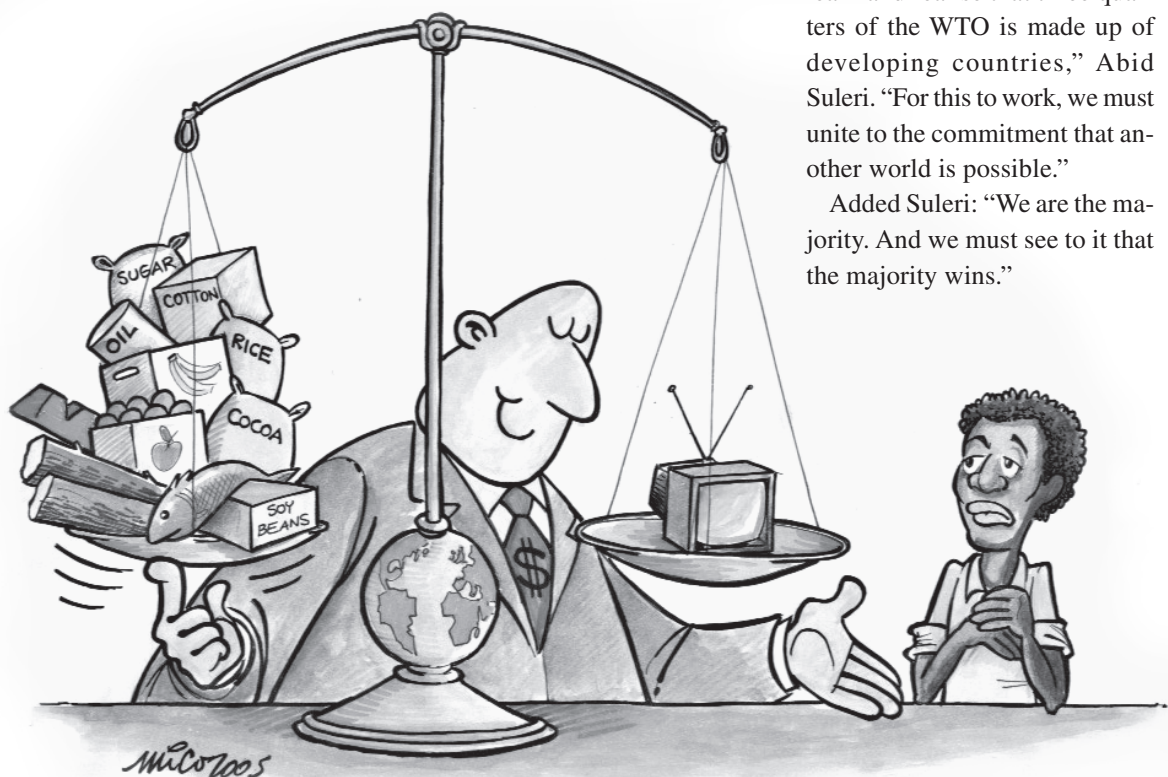
These practices allow economic superpowers to “dump” products, leading to the stifling of local industries and further poverty, hunger, and economic dependency, activists say.

But harping on the WTO isn’t going to make it disappear, says Dr Tarzil Haider Usmani, director general at the Ministry of Science and Technology in Pakistan. “The process of globalisation and the WTO are inevitable, and we shouldn’t bang (our heads) against the wall.”

“What must be done, though, are two things: One is domestic sovereignty, which we (the poor countries) must keep,” he says. “The second thing we must do is to protect against trade reforms and liberalisation that is not in our favour, through the use of social safety nets and protectionist systems. Otherwise, the WTO will do more harm than good.”

Participants at the WSF also say developing countries must learn to use their numbers at international fora. “We have to learn and realise that three quarters of the WTO is made up of developing countries,” Abid Suleri. “For this to work, we must unite to the commitment that another world is possible.”

Added Suleri: “We are the majority. And we must see to it that the majority wins.”



Disaster as Business

The amount of relief money that poured in from near and far for the rehabilitation of communities hit by the December 2004 tsunami was unprecedented. Over a year later, governments are mulling pro-rich reconstruction in the name of rehabilitation, critics say.

By Bikash Sangraula

Every disaster may hold opportunities, but activists at the WSF say the way post-tsunami rehabilitation has virtually been turned into business and commercial opportunities is nothing short of scandalous.

Take the case of Sri Lanka, one of several countries hit by the Indian Ocean tsunami of Dec. 26, 2004.

“The tourism ministry in Sri Lanka sees the disaster as a quirk of fate that has offered the country a unique opportunity to build Sri Lanka into a world-class tourism destination,” said Rev Fr S Guy De Fontgalland, a social activist and founder of Leo Marga Ashram in Sri Lanka. “Can anyone explain to us how this is going to help the poor, the most affected by the tsunami?”

The Tsunami Trust Fund in Sri Lanka has been entrusted to the World Bank, which critics say believes that the building of superhighways, big dams and tourist centres offers a quickfire way to recover from the devastation caused by the tsunami.

With the fund, 25 percent of which are loans, the government is building 15 tourist townships in coastal areas and a Dutch company has already been awarded the contract for that. Additionally, 52 more townships are being built.

There is a lot more that needs more urgent attention than building world-class tourist centres. In Sri Lanka, the tsunami internally displaced 516,150 people. Nearly 200 schools, four universities, and 15 vocational training centres were destroyed. The education of 200,000 students was affected by the disaster.

“Capitalists saw a big market in Sri Lanka after the tsunami,” agreed Rasaratnam Rajaram, president of the Jaffna Fisheries Federation. With many fisherfolk losing their fishing vessels and gear, the European Union found a market for its highly expensive fishing vessels in exchange for the money committed rehabilitation.

But a country shaken by a disaster like the tsunami is often ready to accept any kind of relief, no matter its utility. “Reconstruction these days is another form of capitalist expansion,” said Fontgalland.