

CPEC and the question of loyalty

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Ahsan Iqbal, a minister in the cabinet of the PML-N government, says that all those who oppose the Pakistan-China Economic Corridor (CPEC) are “traitors”. This does not surprise me. Ministers in the previous cabinets of the PML-N government have also decried those who opposed the construction of Kalabagh dam as “traitors”. In both cases, the word traitor was implicitly used for Pakhtun nationalists. The rhetoric of PML-N ministers does not surprise me or anyone else who understands the history of Pakistan. In order to hide their incompetencies, governments use this kind of rhetoric. If the PML-N ministers are referring to the ANP leadership and other Pakhtun nationalists as traitors just because they want transparency during the construction of the CPEC they should re-evaluate their rhetoric. In a democracy, the job of a political party is to protect the interests of its vote bank. Since the ANP is one of the major parties of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and portrays itself as the torchbearer of Pakhtuns, it has all the right to raise questions about the share of Pakhtuns in the CPEC. The PML-N government, instead of declaring the Pakistani Pakhtun population leadership as traitors, should address their concerns.

The concept of the state has changed over time. The state should no more be seen as a territory with population, government and sovereignty. The modern nation state is the construction of a social relationship between its populations. In this sense, the state is reproduced every time when the nature of the social relationship changes. In order to strengthen the state you need to strengthen that social relationship. Unfortunately, in Pakistan, every government tries to assume the status of a state itself and weakens social relationships. Whenever the PML-N forms a government, it forgets about strengthening and reproducing the state through dialogue.

The dominant power hubs of Punjab, in order to suppress subaltern classes, use rhetoric and narratives that position people from other provinces as ‘others’. They want other provinces either to accept their decisions or be ready to be labelled as traitors. Unfortunately, Pakhtuns (especially nationalists) always have to negotiate their identities in Pakistan. Whenever someone talks about the rights of this neglected population, they are described as traitors. Punjab-centric political parties have always used powerful institutions like the media and educational institutions to demonise the Pakhtun nationalist leadership. The education system and media have been used to develop a cultural memory of the nation where every Pakhtun nationalist leader is looked at with suspicion. It is easy to accuse the Pakhtun leadership of being traitorous, corrupt and even Indian agents since governments have used powerful institutions, the conduct of groups of people, discourses in public texts, mediated forms, artistic expressions and individual accounts and ascriptions about the conduct of Pakhtun leadership to develop a national cultural memory that raise suspicions about the conduct of Pakhtun nationalists.

Cultural memory is a fluid or contingent relationship between the past and the present: the past is reconstructed in a particular way to build understandings of the present and a sense of identity. Cultural memory always makes nations understand a contemporary event through knowledge of the past; the past is brought to the present and, in the process, the two are conflated. Scholars agree that cultural memories are

constructed through national discourses that enable systematic forgetting. The Pakistani nation has forgotten that the main nationalist leader, Bacha Khan, was a reformer. He fought against colonial powers. He established schools in the Pakhtun belt. He wanted to enlighten Pakhtuns to send their daughters to schools. And, yes, I still remember that the ANP is one of the signatories of the Constitution of Pakistan. Even writing this article, I am again proving myself to be a Pakistani patriot by trying to demonstrate that we (Pakhtuns) are as patriotic as other Pakistanis. For how long will we continue verifying our loyalty to Pakistan? We own Pakistan as much as you do. However, we will still struggle for our rights.

The PML-N ministers, instead of challenging our patriotism, should come clean about the projects that are looked at with suspicion by people from smaller provinces. Why would a government in a democratic country try to hide information on important projects like the CPEC from public eye? If someone has any concern, they should be taken into confidence. We need public debate and open access to information about the CPEC. The government should clarify its stance to the people of Pakistan. It should clarify what decisions it has taken and the logic behind those decisions. ‘Otherising’ people from smaller provinces will not solve the solution; it will create further problems. We need to reproduce the state by strengthening our social relationships and by constructing new cultural memories and identities. Let us all own Pakistan and let us all take collective decisions for the future of Pakistan.

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