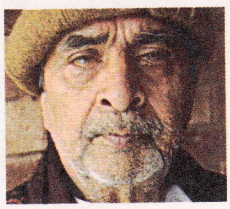
Leaving the Left Behind | Syed Jamaluddin Naqvi with Humair Ishtiaq
Pakistan Study Centre | Karachi | 2014 | Price: 600 rupees



End of an ideology

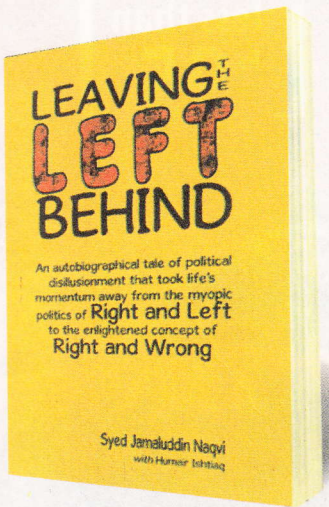
We will surely take note if Munawar Hasan, the former head of Jamaat-e-Islami, wrote a memoir saying the ideology and politics that consumed his life was a misguided and wasteful effort.

[By Haider Nizamani]

Such is the irrelevance of the organised left in Pakistan today that few have taken note of the autobiography of the man who was in the top tier of the Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP) for almost 40 years but now recants what he believed in and practiced as political creed. Irony is that even the leftover left circles appear to have completely ignored Syed Jamaluddin Naqvi's mea culpa.

Communists as a political entity seldom posed any serious challenge to the established political and economic order in Pakistan. Despite their political insignificance, however, the paranoid state kept a watchful eye on them and periodically killed, tortured and imprisoned the individuals associated, or deemed to have been associated, with the CPP. For much of its existence during the Cold War years, the CPP operated more like a cult group of committed workers who thought of themselves to be on the right side of history.

Naqvi's autobiography, Leaving the Left Behind, enriches our existing knowledge in, at least, three interrelated areas. Like any autobiography, we get to know, to some degree, the person who penned it. Secondly, it reveals hitherto little known insider information on the internal dynamics of what once was the CPP and the people associated with it. And, finally, we learn about the ideology and political practice of the CPP in a hostile political milieu.



Born in 1932 in Allahabad, hometown of the Nehrus, Naqvi came to Karachi in 1950, as did many educated Muslims of the Gangetic plains who formed the bulk of the ruling elite in the newly formed Pakistan. The octogenarian, full of bitterness at having lived the life of chasing shadows guided by "dogmatic communist beliefs", now finds solace in playing with his grandchildren. A teacher of English literature by profession and a communist by passion, his latter association determined the limits of where he could teach. Imprisoned first in 1954, then again for eight months in 1973 by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's regime for allegedly "stealing a buffalo", Naqvi also spent years behind the bars in the 1980s under General Ziaul Haq's dreaded dictatorship. Unable to secure stable employment in Karachi, he spent the 1960s in Hyderabad to teach at the City College. In the 1970s, he was one of the four-member politburo of the banned CPP. What he saw during a two-week trip in 1990 to what was then the Soviet Union totally disillusioned and "intellectually shattered" him. An avowed communist then turned anti-communist.

Our disillusioned comrade shares with his readers the organisation and politics of the CPP. When formed, the party was led by Syed Sajjad Zaheer, a suave gentleman from Lucknow and the founder of the Progressive Writers Association. He left for India in the mid-1950s after a few years of incarceration in Pakistan because of the infamous Rawalpindi Conspiracy case. Urdu-writing urbanite men from Karachi and Lahore comprised the CPP in those years. These armchair Marxists claimed to be working for a revolution. But, as Naqvi says in his book, "What we wanted through that 'revolution' is something I am still not quite sure about." He correctly observes that "the slogans that we used to coin and subsequently put them out in the form of wall-chalking sound so hollow, unrealistic and totally out of proportion with our capacity – which was nothing but incapacity – to do anything concrete." But the coercive arm of the state did not spare even such harmless comrades as it banned the CPP in 1964.

After the ban, the CPP cadre decided to join the National Awami Party (NAP) while keeping their covert party structure intact. They would become

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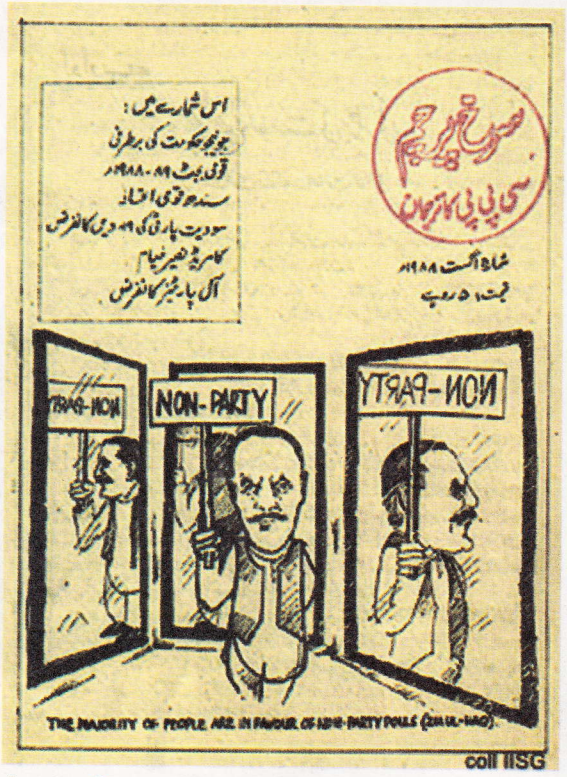
part of various mainstream political parties from that point onward, without leaving any indelible mark on Pakistan's political horizon. The CPP's presence in broad-based leftist parties earned its members the reputation of conspirators, who would at times ditch their allies for inexplicable political considerations. Although Naqvi maintains that the communists had hardly any say in the NAP, B M Kutty in his book graphically narrates how the communists ditched Mir Ghaus Bakhsh Bizenjo, a card-carrying communist, during the drafting of the 1973 Constitution. Naqvi's memoir, unfortunately, hardly sheds any light on specific policy or practical blunders of the CPP. On the contrary, he claims that history testifies that "the Party (CPP) has not made serious mistakes on major political issues."

Naqvi informs us that at the height of the CPP's popularity in the mid 1980s, its membership ranged from 2,000 to 3,000 people. Among its assets were a cyclostyle machine and printing paper for *Surkh Parcham*, the party's Urdu publication, with a subscription of 1,000, and the Sindhi publication *Halchal*, with a subscription of 5,000. Contents of the *Surkh Parcham* read like a pamphlet laced with Marxist jargon and contained little mature analysis about Pakistani polity. Yet, during the Haq regime, possession of *Surkh Parcham* could mean years in imprisonment.

Ideological dogmatism, conspiratorial politics, mutual mistrust, and chronic infighting contributed to the eventual disintegration of the CPP. Naqvi accuses Imtiaz Alam, who now heads the South Asian Free Media Association (Safma), and Mir Thebo, once a known name among leftist circles of Sindh and now living a low-profile existence in the American Midwest, as having joined the CPP to "destroy" it. Some of Naqvi's erstwhile comrades accuse him of the same. Neither side offers solid evidence to back up these serious allegations, though. Naqvi concludes his book by unfairly equating communists with the Taliban and declaring both to be wrong.

Most autobiographies are exercises in self glorification and only few look back critically at one's life. Naqvi's book belongs in the latter category. Students of Pakistani politics, particularly those interested in the broader left, will find this book a useful read.



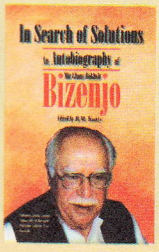
A cartoon from the Communist Party of Pakistan's Urdu publication *Surkh Parcham*, 1988

Although he wrote the autobiography after losing faith in Marxism at the tail end of a 50-year long political career, Naqvi's book is saturated with jargon firmly embedded in banal Marxism of the Stalinist variety. Old habits of thought die hard.

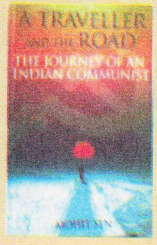
It may, therefore, be easy to find fault with Naqvi's political beliefs. Yet he belongs to that category of politicians whose integrity is beyond doubt. He treated politics as a noble profession and not as a means to personal enrichment. In the current political landscape, people like Naqvi are almost extinct. ■

Further Reading

What Went Wrong? by Zamir Sheikh, 2014
A recently published book based on interviews with some of the leading figures of the left movement in Pakistan.



In Search of Solutions: The Autobiography of Mir Ghaus Bakhsh Bizenjo, edited by B M Kutty, 2009
Bizenjo remained with the left for most of his life but instead of embracing orthodox communism only to abandon it, he consistently adopted a healthy critical outlook toward Marxism.



A Traveller and the Road: The Journey of An Indian Communist by Mohit Sen, 2003
Mohit Sen's engaging and eminently readable book tells the story of communist politics in India.