The Dutch Connection
Pakistani NGOs networking in the Netherlands

What could possibly be more distant from one another than Dutch policy and Pakistan’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 Dedebant

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he Institute of Social Studies (ISS, The Hague), the International Institute of Social History (ISSH, 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. By 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 Left and Left-of-Centre of Pakistani politics – have been working or studying in the Netherlands and/or have had some links to various Dutch civil society institutions and non-governmental organisations.

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’s and minorities’ rights that were willy-nilly safeguarded by the previous government, Zia ul-Haq’s decade of Islamic military rule eradicated the very notion of democratic pluralism. Putting forward the view that the ummah should observe the Koran, he intensified censorship of the press, banned parties from the political arena and excluded student and labour unions.

Most of the reputedly progressive or civil society institutions and non-governmental organizations in the world) and Rotterdam (the world’s largest port and important business centre). Leiden offers participants an understanding of non-statist histories and the actors involved, 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 70’s (during the Baluchistan uprising for instance) and 80’s (in the Move-ment for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD)) which supports the production of non-statist histories stands out as another interesting example. There is a sense of violence and trau-matic divisions and which has geographical and mental borders that are tightly controlled (particularly those between Pakistan and India), this out-side incentive for creating links and/or producing an alternative historiogra-phy 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 gov-ernment). The role and methodology of the semi-public Dutch co-funding agency, the Netherlands Organization for International Development Co-operation (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 assist-tance programmes as well as into the political, ideological and economical underpinnings of Dutch foreign policy in this regard.

The response of the state is also cru-cial. In times of conflict over domestic or international issues (women’s rights and nuclear proliferation, for example) NGOs, backed up by their donors or their foreign supporters, tend to bypass their state and directly search for ways to bring about change and fulfil their intents and feelings in the Pakistan. The response was damaging at times like when the govern-ment 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 activities of NGOs, donor agencies and govern-ment agencies allow may the Pakistani gov-ernment to strategically locate itself vis-à-vis other local and/or regional demands over certain issues. The Pak-istani state is able to use this fuzziness or such parallel diplomacy can be exploit-ed 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 ques-tions concerning the South Asian dimension. What needs to be studied in depth are the ways through which South Asian NGOs’ activities link with third-party country like the Netherlands allow them to concen-trate on matters on bilateral/multi-lateral importance which facilitates their cooperation despite the political dif-ferences between their governments and states. As mentioned earlier, the most common one is the semi-public Dutch NGOs in many developing countries like Pakistan is that they serve as a ‘fifth column’ that actually promotes the interests of the donor state, its issues, edu-cation and alliances. This accusation of impin-ing the sovereignty of the state has been the most common way to dis-miss the activities of NGOs. Does this ‘soft subversion of terri-toriality’ outside the South Asian con-text provide a solid framework and foundation for future cross-border cooperation along depoliticized lines? We take for granted that the forma-tion of civil society organizations, and bilateral/multilateral ties should not be seen as simple forms of cultural transfer (i.e. the transfer of ‘Western agenda and values’ to non-Western societies via non-conventional means).

We obviously do not view the Pakistani NGOs as passive recipients of foreign ideologies and policies. We 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 countires to by-pass what would be several 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 Pak-istan, whose governments remain at odds with each other. The relatively open policy of the Dutch government in this respect has helped to encourage such networks 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 bur-den 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.

References


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Add a European Distinction (Leiden) to your university credentials

The Netherlands is recognized as one of the most multicultural countries in the world. Involving university, London (1975) has retained over the centuries the highest academic standards and is considered one of the leading universities in Europe. It is centrally located near Amsterdam, Schiphol Airport, The Hague (the judicial capital of the world) and Rotterdam (the world’s largest port and important business centre). Leiden offers participants an understanding of non-statist histories and the actors involved, 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 70’s (during the Baluchistan uprising for instance) and 80’s (in the Move-ment for the Restoration of Democra-cy). The NGO arena, often labelled as the ‘kiss of death’ for the vitality of the leftist opposition, is seen as the back-bone of civil society building is cer-tainly not without consequence on the relationship between the donours and the NGOs. It is indeed inter-esting to note that cross-border coop-eration is most likely to occur in areas of broad, non-partisan importance: the environment, women’s rights, migration, water issues, population, disas-ter management, arts and cultural exchanges, etc. Therefore, what needs to be stud-ied is the ways through which various actors – NGOs, CSOs and institutes – interact, form loose instrumental coalitions and partnerships and, at times, diverge.

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