

## The campaign diary

### A hundred beats

Sunday, December 16, 2007

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Seema is a labour leader. Seema is a steely 62-year-old woman. She has spent most of her life out on the road, meeting workers, organising unions, campaigning for the rights of those who have built this country. Seema is a constant companion out on the campaign trail this election month in Larkana. She is in many ways a dynamo--she is a toughie, this woman. She speaks three languages, she rages with an inherent sense of Marxist discourse and political awareness, and she's a proud worker. She was part of a women's delegation that travelled to Mexico in the 1970s to speak on women's rights in the Third World (Seema likes to tell this story often, almost too often). When her activism became threatening to those in political and corporate power, she had to go dark. Seema spent much of Gen Zia-ul-Haq's murderous regime in the 1980s underground. She laid low--but not very quietly--until the promise of democracy rang out after Zia's death. But Seema and those like her did not get what they fought for; their hopes were quickly dashed by eleven years of wanton corruption and renewed violence under the banner of so-called "democracy." Seema never gave up her idealism, though; she's still active today and she's still fighting for change. You should know one more thing about Seema: she's a bawler. She cries like the rest of us breathe--constantly and as a reflex. It drives me crazy. I don't think I've ever spent an hour with Seema that didn't include tears. Sometimes she cries out of hope, out of happiness, other times out of nostalgia, but these days her tears come from disappointment and from the poverty and disenfranchisement she sees around her. Those people Seema fought for? They are back where they were decades ago. The movement is in need of new battles. There are so many that need to be fought today. Seema's battle is just one of them.

I'm going to spend the next month writing to you about people like Seema, about life on the road, about the needs and frustrations of the people who live with us, but not at all like us. I'm going to write to you from the trenches, from the campaign trail. This diary will not be an endorsement, don't worry. It will not be a form of the all-too-cheap media advertising we see these days. This diary will be about you, about our future, about women like Seema, and it will be my way of archiving the increasingly dismal and unsustainable manner in which most of our compatriots live. This is it, this is an election year. We either change the system now or we spend another miserable five years suffering under it and complaining about the buffoons we have to lead us. Campaigning in the Deep South forty years ago as a civil rights activist, Martin Luther King Jr told Americans that the time was upon them to embark on a "radicalisation of our values." The same is true for us Pakistanis today.

Here is a sample of where our journey will take us.

I spend most of my days eating and inhaling copious amounts of dust. The interior of Sindh is blanketed in the stuff. In Joghi the dust tastes like sulphur, but sweet as if it were laced with

cinnamon. It is one of the many smells of Sindh, like the scent of the rice fields cooking the rice in the summertime or the syrupy aroma of sugarcane juice that comes from young children as they gnaw at the stalks of the plant throughout the day. Larkana is my home. It's a city of around three million--the fourth largest in Sindh. It is a city that is politically active and alive, it is harmoniously diverse, and it is open and true, but it doesn't always work.

In Bhais Colony we visit houses that live in a neighbourhood deprived of paved roads. There is no electricity, not even a single naked bulb, so we sit and meet under the light of a full moon. There is no running water and there are no schools. The children outnumber the grownups at a corner meeting in Bhais colony--they are out in droves. I ask why they would be so enthusiastic about attending a political gathering (I have to draw on my energy reserves most of the time), and the answer comes: "They have nothing else to do." They have no TVs, no books because they are unable to read, they have no public spaces to play in, and so they are left to consider politics as their only viable form of entertainment. The residents in Bhais Colony had a prime minister from their city two times in those pitiful eleven years. And now the dictatorship of Gen Pervez Musharraf--because it's still a military dictatorship, no matter what kind of outfit Musharraf wears--is illegally signing into law an ordinance that will expand the term limit for prime ministers. They are criminals, these people. They have destroyed our country and they are gearing up for continued constitutional and political (don't forget financial!) slaughter under the guise of "democracy."

On one of the days that we spend in the most unusual kind of seat adjustment--playing musical charpais at a host's home as we make room for more guest to join us. I speak to a sardar who is unlike any sardar I have met before. He is a socialist, he doesn't believe in the feudal sense of financial and political entitlement that comes with his sardar-ship. So he denounced it. He wrote a column in a Sindhi newspaper and renounced his privileged position. The sardar proves to me that there is ground for change, but only for those who are brave enough to take it.

On Sunday at 5:47 p.m. I was driving through Miro Khan Chowk in the middle of the city when we got stuck in a jam. The main road had been blocked by a pileup of cars and Rangers were on the streets trying to move traffic. As the cars started to budge there was a problem. An old man weathered in years was unable to move his tractor fast enough. A Ranger -- whose name I could not see on his badge -- removed his belt from his trousers and bent it double. He took the belt and slapped the old man on the tractor with it. Just like that, like he was an animal. The old man couldn't do anything; he couldn't react to such a violent and abusive display of power. The Ranger shouted at him and beat him once more with his belt. The old man eventually moved, but that Ranger stayed in his place. He deserves to be deprived of his position for acting as brutally as he did, but that didn't happen. He acted how those in power commonly do; he'll probably be promoted. We live in a society that has been so dehumanised by violence and fear we survive by walking on eggshells. It's simply not sustainable, we have to change the way we live. We do that with our vote. I can't say it enough, but I will say it in every column from now on.

There is good here, there is so much good here, but it's un-channelled. There are the enormously kind men who run the chai-khanas, who spoon cups of sugary tea into small plastic cups for us as we pass in the afternoons. There are the kunge--white birds with necks shaped as question marks--that dot the farm landscape in both winter and summer. There are days when Seema

breaks her record and doesn't cry. If our efforts are to go towards anything, it has to be towards channelling that good. I'm only 25, my country is only nominally older than me. We're going to grow old together, the least we can do is work towards aging equitably and justly. There is a better future out there, but only for those brave enough to fight for it.