

The Sixteenth Newsletter (2018): Lives Taken, Lives Lived



Dear Friends,

Being a journalist is a dangerous business. It is not dangerous to be a *stenographer* – to be someone who regurgitates the views of the powerful. A real journalist is someone who gets beneath the stories that surrounds us, who seeks answers to difficult questions, who won't leave a story because to do so would be to betray both the people who tell us these stories and those who need to hear them.

Thus far, according to the Committee for the Protection of Journalists, twenty-eight journalists have been killed this year. Too many of these journalists have been killed in Afghanistan. Their names are not well

known, so here they are:

Abdullah Hananzai

Abdul Manan Arghand

Ali Saleemi

Ghazi Rasooli

Maharram Durrani

Nowroz Ali Rajabi

Sabawoon Kakar

Saleem Talash

Shah Marai

Yar Mohammed Tokhi

Yesterday, Shujaat Bukhari was shot dead in Srinagar's Press Enclave in Lal Chowk. For those of us who write in the universe of *The Hindu* – where he was a correspondent from 1997 to 2012 – and for *Frontline* – for whom he was the Jammu and Kashmir Bureau Chief – Shujaat is not another name on a list. He was a colleague and a friend, a brave reporter, a real journalist. He had received police protection since an attack on him in 2006. In this fatal attack, his two security guards were also shot dead. Three men had been waiting for him. After they shot him and his guards dead, they jumped on a motorcycle and fled the scene.

Jammu and Kashmir, the state in northern India, has been hazardous for journalists ever since Doordarshan television director Lassa Kaul was killed by militants in 1990. The militants have not been the only assailants. Indian soldiers have also turned their ire on journalists – one remembers the death of cameraman Javed Ahmed Mir, who was shot during a demonstration in 2008. In 1996, Shujaat had been abducted by gunmen in Anantnag and held for several hours. A decade later, two gunmen seized him. When one tried to shoot him, his gun jammed. Shujaat – bravely – made his escape. At that time, Shujaat said something that rings true even today, 'It is virtually impossible to know who your enemies are and who your friends are'. It is not clear who murdered Shujaat.

Shujaat was shot on the same day that the United Nations called for an independent evaluation of human rights violations in Jammu and Kashmir. In the UN's 49-page report detailed accusations of these violations. It is on the basis of this report that the chief of the UN's Human Rights Council called for the establishment of a Commission of Inquiry.

Two weeks before he was murdered, Shujaat went on twitter to document the terrible death of Kaiser Bhat, age 21, who had been run over by an Indian army jeep. Shujaat shared a video of the attack on Kaiser Bhat and then said, 'These pictures from Srinagar downtown are very disturbing. This is a horrible way to quell a protest'. This is the kind of clear outrage that came from Shujaat. Having posted the video and picture,

Shujaat began to be attacked. 'I am being trolled', he wrote.

Kaiser Bhat's sisters – Toiba, aged 19, and Iffat, aged 17 – cried when they heard that their brother had been run over and killed by the Indian army jeep. 'Where will we go now', they asked, in voices faint with grief. Their parents had already died. They lived with their uncle and aunt. Kaiser had decided to forgo his own studies and get a job, so that he could earn money to make sure that his sisters continued with their education. This was important to them.

It was inevitable that Kaiser would get involved in the protests against the intolerable and suffocating Indian military presence in the Kashmir valley. There are over 700,000 Indian soldiers in Kashmir. The Indian government has itself said that there are no more than 150 militants in the state. What mathematics makes this ratio – 700,000 to 150 – reasonable is beyond belief. The soldiers are trained to see a 'terrorist' behind every tree. Given immense authority by the Armed Forces (Jammu and Kashmir) Special Powers Act (AFSPA), 1990, these soldiers are known to have acted with impunity against Kashmiri civilians. No wonder the new UN report calls upon the Indian government to immediately repeal this Act. To get a sense of why this act – AFSPA – is such a bone of contention, read Shujaat's article from *Frontline* (March 16, 2018) on the Shopian firings ([here](#)).

Shujaat's coverage for *Frontline* is an indictment of the Indian government's policy in Kashmir, but it also offers a sharp criticism of the degeneration of politics in the state. Most recently, on May 11, Shujaat led the coverage on the Kathua Rape Case. You can read his main story on the case [here](#). Shujaat's writings show us with preciseness and feeling that Kashmir is in deep distress. Shujaat had written a story this March that tracked why so many young men had turned to militancy (you can read it [here](#)). In one of his last tweets about Kaiser's death, Shujaat wrote that the authorities have to realise 'why this fear of death is missing in Kashmiri youth'. It is because of his reporting that a serious question should have been raised after the death of Kaiser. The question is not why such a sensitive and generous young man would such as Kaiser get involved. The real question is why everyone in the Kashmir valley is not on the street every day. Kaiser joined the protests and was killed.

In 2016, Shujaat said of the dangers to journalists, 'Threats to life, intimidation, assault, arrest and censorship have been part of the life of a typical local journalist'. His life is now taken. It will be remembered.



The picture above – by Ezzeldeen al-Natour, a Jordanian photojournalist – captures the protests in his homeland.

Shujaat Bokhari would have been pleased to follow the outbreak of protests on both sides of the Jordan River – in Palestine and in Jordan. In Palestine, anger in the population against what happened along the Gaza perimeter fence and what happens every day to the Palestinians has now morphed into **action**. The protests in Ramallah called for a new kind of politics, one that does not negotiate away Palestinian hopes but one that is able to bring the Palestinian views to the forefront. In Jordan, the monarchy is caught between the United States and Israel that wants Jordan to affirm its treaty with Israel to smother Palestinian hopes and the Palestinian population in Jordan that wants the Jordanians to abrogate the hated peace treaty, which would put pressure on Israel. But, as the Turkish Marxist Sungur Savran notes **here**, this protest is – at heart – a protest against the economic squeeze that the population has been under. These are both positive signs. A former senior government official from Jordan writes to tell me, ‘it will be wise to keep Jordan on your radar screen’. So too Palestine.

The protests in Palestine are significant. Two weeks ago, I had introduced you to the work of Stop the Wall, which attempts to build links between various Palestinian formations such as trade unions, farmers’ associations and youth groups. This work, difficult as it is, will eventually produce a new Palestinian project. It is towards that momentum that we deliver our solidarity. Not for an abstraction, but for a tangible politics. In India, not only has the All-India Kisan Sabha – the farmer’s union – but also the Students Federation of India have come out swinging for Palestine. That’s at least twenty million Indians who stand with Palestine (you can read my report on this solidarity for Palestine from India’s communist movement **here**).



Meanwhile, at the other end of Asia, in Singapore, Donald Trump of the United States met with Kim Jong-un of North Korea. Much has been made of this meeting, which – although brief – has opened a new historical dynamic. Kim came to the meeting on an Air China plane. This is not just a minor detail. It is very significant. China lies behind this deal. It is deeply concerned that the United States has been eager to push its troops right up to the Chinese border on the Korean peninsula. The Chinese worry that this could have certainly taken place if North Korea imploded and if it were absorbed into South Korea. That is the reason why the Chinese have been eager for the North Koreans to make a rapprochement with the West and with South Korea so as to maintain the status quo. Kim made few concessions, but he was able to wrest guarantees from the United States to tone down its belligerence (to get a full – but brief – sense of the tensions on the Korean peninsula, see our first **dossier** from **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research**). The North Koreans have pledged to de-nuclearize the peninsula since 1992. There is nothing new here. What they mean by de-nuclearization is the real issue. It will not be on the table for a long time yet. Don't anticipate North Korea to go the way of either East Germany or Libya. The Chinese have played a shrewd hand. They have all the trumps. For my extended report, go **here**.

I've been on a flight from Kerala to Qatar as I write this newsletter. I'm thinking of so many other friends, other journalists, who have been killed over the past few years – Syed Saleem Shahzad in Pakistan, Sardar Ahmad in Afghanistan, Serena Shim in Turkey, Gauri Lankesh in India and onwards. So many bright faces, so many truth-tellers, wiped out.

One piece of good news: the bid to legalise abortion goes forward with the green light from the Argentine Congress. This, combined with the Argentine football team's refusal to play against Israel, is a good sign from the Southern Cone. Perhaps Messi, who is said to have insisted that his team not play Israel as long as the Palestinians are occupied, might walk away with his World Cup. Or will it be Brazil. Or, am I romantic enough to hope for Iran.....

Warmly, Vijay.