

International Colloquium on

**Public Action in Pakistan: Between Apathy and Anger**

March 19-20, 2012, Islamabad, Pakistan

**WORKING SESSIONS PLAN**

**Session One: Apathy and Anger: Setting the Debate**

This is a multi-disciplinary session which will discuss the issues surrounding public action and participatory democracy in Pakistan and how public policy can address the complex issue of apathy or whether apathy should be addressed at all? What kind of historical experience produces social apathy? Is it a comment on the performance of representative democracy and legal-rational/formal institutions that the people are so apathetic towards the public sphere, who otherwise are quite active in their informal social activism? Or is it the arrival of a new set of political hierarchies which the people resist by ignoring all the political avenues open to them? Is it the development agenda and narrative that is creating apathy and anger? Is it possible that one day collective apathy will be replaced by collective anger or will Pakistan continue to simmer politically but never boil over? Why does the narrative of 'desire for change and justice' appears to be encouraging different 'social groups' to either become apathetic or to base their mobilization strategies at 'anger', while competing for public goods on parochial basis, instead of leveraging genuine collective action for reforms? Are we, the members of academia and policymaking institutions, being too prescriptive by assuming that there should be a collective will that expresses itself only politically and transforms policymaking?

**Session Two: The Psycho-social Dynamics of Apathy and Anger**

This session will address the issues of public apathy and public anger from psychological and sociological perspectives. People are apathetic because they are waiting for the charismatic leader or is their apathy a logical result of social anomie? Is it the failure of our public policy that our social and political life is imagined in different ways in different provinces/cultural settings thereby thwarting the collective societal expression? What kind of individual and societal factors play a more important role in the growing apathy and anger? What are the social institutions that discourage the political expressions of the public and make the public apathetic? Is it the narrative of a 'normal life putting premium on continuity' which is keeping people from launching new political movements? Can a metaphysical system produce apathy and anger? Does religion and culture play a similar role in shaping the attitudes of apathy and anger in different countries of South Asia regarding the local, regional and global issues? Are the human beings becoming atomized through their immersion in personal, portable gadgets and therefore apolitical? Is there any difference in the levels of apathy and anger between the urban and the rural settings? We

expect papers for this session to explore these questions and the like from psychological and sociological perspectives in individuals and collectives.

### **Session Three: The Corporate & Social Media and Us**

In Pakistan, the electronic and print media has experienced an unprecedented growth in the last decade. Participants in this session will address the role of media in the production of apathy and/or anger in particular and social change in general. Is the media in Pakistan depoliticizing and de-radicalizing the public and managing and diverting public anger by creating consumeristic fantasies of apolitical utopias? How can the media help create a public sphere where the collective welfare and social justice can be demanded; and what is the role of media in creating an egalitarian and participatory political culture? What is the role of the social media in breaking the cycle of apathy and anger? How does the diversity of languages in Pakistan expand or shrink the common space of meaning?

### **Session Four: Literary and Creative Expressions and Public Action**

Literature and creative arts contribute to the production of a common space of shared meanings, aspirations and aesthetics. Literature also plays an important role in the struggles against oppression and subjugation. In Pakistan many writers have dealt with the effects of mob violence at the time of the Partition/Independence on people's psyche. How is the impact of large scale outbreaks of violence and the repetition of the gruesome images in the public sphere of Pakistan lived through arts? What is the contribution of literary and cultural creative works in helping us understand the individual and collective attitudes towards social change in Pakistan? Are literature and creative arts helping people connect with the global without alienating them from the local or are these becoming themselves tools of alienation? What is the role of creative/revolutionary writers in creating a more democratic public sphere? Can literature and creative arts effectively address issues of apathy and anger? For this session, we hope to receive Papers which help us better understand the individual and social attitudes towards social change with the eyes of an author and the relevance of modern literature to the theme of the colloquium.

### **Session Five: Civil Society, Development and Apathy**

Civil society organizations in Pakistan are perceived by many as empowering and liberatory institutions. For many others still, the role of CSOs in bringing about a positive social change in Pakistan remains suspect. What is exactly the role of development organizations, and NGOs in producing or eliminating apathy and anger? How can this trust deficit be addressed? Are there any causes left worth fighting for? Will the world become post-revolutionary if all issues of justice and human rights are debated in boardroom meetings as projects? What is the cost of complex social issues becoming an organizational 'project'? How was the nature of pre-independence and pre-colonial collective action different and which factors caused the historical evolution to the present? Is the indigene coping with different waves of colonialism? How are freedoms gained or lost? Is future of public action in Pakistan largely dependent on Civil Society Organization (CSOs)? Can and how we can differentiate between the role of CSOs as an expression of civil society and a contractor on a development project? What implications such dual roles of CSOs have for the future of public sphere in Pakistan?

## **Session Six: Education of Politics and Politics of Education**

Educational activities have deep and multifarious impacts on the personality of students. If a society is marked by widespread apathy, anger, violence and in-sensitivity, its educational system must share a part of the blame. For this Session, we would like to get Papers on the way the Educational systems create individual and collective attitudes vis-à-vis the social change in the society. The speakers in this session will address issues related to Pakistan's education policies, curricula, the politics of literacy, representation, and the multitude. Is there any difference between the way in which literate and illiterate people understand and express their apathy and anger? Does Pakistan's Educational system reproduce the fragmentation of the value systems, creating social conflict, anger and apathy in the society, which in turn hinder the emergence of consensus on the issues vital to the future of Pakistan? To what extent is it the responsibility of a national educational system to produce 'progressive', 'forward looking', 'critical thinking' attitudes?

## **Session Seven: Rays of Hope**

Pakistan and the region around did have many instances of successful public actions. Most of these might be considered less than perfect. But still, they affirm the possibility of new movements. This session would focus on recent movements of public action in the region. What was the significance of the Lawyers' Movement in Pakistan? What is the role of the peoples of the global south in redefining world politics? Is the public square (Al-Tahrir Square) a tenable model of reform? South Asia, particularly India, has witnessed many well organized public actions in the recent past. Are there lessons in it for the rest of South Asia? What are the lessons of different people's movements across the world for the policymakers?

## **The Roundtable: The Way Forward**

In this session, all the presenters of the Colloquium, having listened to the research and debate on different dimensions of Apathy and Anger, will share their insights with a view to evolve a more coherent picture which could lay the ground for a more meaningful public action in future, in particular, in Pakistan. The participants would also be requested to suggest a roadmap for future academic and policy research, related to public action, apathy and anger. This session would also provide an opportunity for the participants of the Colloquium to explore options for future synergetic work.

## **CONTACTS**

<p><b>Mr.Suaiman Ahmad</b> Deputy Director (Academics) Social Sciences &amp; Humanities Research Council of Pakistan Higher Education Commission Islamabad Phone: +92-51-90402428 Fax: +92-51-90402107 Email: <a href="mailto:slahmad@hec.gov.pk">slahmad@hec.gov.pk</a></p>	<p><b>Ms.Huma Shazia Siddiqi</b> Research Fellow Institute of Social and Policy Sciences (I-SAPS) P. O. Box 1379 Islamabad, Pakistan Phone: +92-51-111-739-739 Fax: +92-51-2825336 Email: <a href="mailto:hsiddiqi@i-saps.org">hsiddiqi@i-saps.org</a></p>
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