

UK: Rabina Khan is no alternative in Tower Hamlets mayoral contest

Paul Mitchell
10 June 2015

Britain's pseudo-left groups are supporting Rabina Khan in the election for executive mayor being re-run in the London borough of Tower Hamlets on June 11.

Khan is a close associate of former Tower Hamlets First (THF) Mayor Lutfur Rahman, who was sacked by High Court Election Commissioner Richard Mawrey in April.

The Commissioner upheld a number of allegations against Rahman including:

- Fraud. Voting papers in the May 2014 election were double-cast or cast from false addresses.
- Bribery. Council grants were given to ineligible organisations.
- “Spiritual influence”. Voters were told by imams that it was their “religious duty” as Muslims to vote for Rahman.
- Issuing false statements against Labour Party candidate John Biggs.

Mawrey declared the May 2014 election void, disqualified Rahman from holding electoral office for five years, and ordered him to pay £250,000 in costs.

Since last year, unelected commissioners appointed by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government have been running the council's grant-giving, appointments, property deals and election services, after an investigation by accountancy firm PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC) accused Rahman of cronyism and mismanagement.

The *World Socialist Web Site* explained that there had been a long-running campaign led by right-wing political forces against Rahman after his election as the first mayor of Tower Hamlets in 2010, with the principal accusation being that he had links to extremist Islamist groups. At the time, the *WSWS* said the government's pose as defenders of democracy was “grotesque”, given the series of corruption scandals in parliament and the multibillion-pound raid on taxpayer's funds in 2008 to bail out a banking system on the verge of collapse due to speculation and outright criminality.

The PWC report had, moreover, completely ignored the austerity measures introduced by Labour and continued by the coalition, which were chiefly responsible for the financial problems confronting Tower Hamlets and other councils. Had the government launched an investigation into virtually any local authority, a comparable pretext would no doubt have been found to justify the authoritarian move.

At the same time, we opposed lending any support to Rahman, noting that he was a businessman and career Labour politician before his deselection in 2010. We noted that his image as an alternative to Labour was largely created by pseudo-left groups, including the Socialist Workers Party and George Galloway's Respect. We insisted that defending services against central government attacks does not mean an alliance with the local authorities—which are everywhere implementing the cuts demanded of them—or an embrace of the type of localist and communal politics that have also enabled the government to impose its plans.

Rahman had courted wealthy local businessmen, religious leaders and self-appointed “community leaders”, while imposing cuts of over £70 million, with the loss of hundreds of jobs and reductions in services. He told the *Guardian* in 2013 that he wanted nothing more than to return to “Labour's fold” and that he and fellow ex-Labour councillors, including Khan, were the means to unite the party and bridge the chasm between the national leadership and the rank and file. One of Rahman's main benefactors, local businessman Shiraj Haque, announced his support for Labour's Biggs in the election June 11.

The same praise formerly heaped on Rahman by the pseudo-left groups is now being lavished on Khan. After the High Court ruling, a “Defend Democracy in Tower Hamlets” meeting was called amid talk that the pseudo-left would field its own candidate. Galloway, who had lost his seat as Respect MP in Bradford West in May's

general election, was one suggestion.

The THF did not stand a candidate in either the two Tower Hamlets constituencies in the General Election, while the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) stood Hugo Pierre in Poplar and Limehouse, and Glyn Robbins on a joint slate with Left Unity in Bethnal Green and Bow.

In the May 2014 mayoral election, Pierre had criticised the Rahman regime (and by implication Khan who was Rahman's cabinet member for housing) for the borough's housing crisis. Some 20,000 people were on the waiting list, 8,000 houses were in need of urgent rehousing, and private rents were the fourth highest in the country. A process of social cleansing was taking place in which the poor were being forced out of the borough. Pierre told the local newspaper, "I oppose all the cuts in this borough," adding, "All the other candidates will impose the cuts central government laid down."

Hundreds turned up to the "Defend Democracy in Tower Hamlets" meeting, to be addressed by speakers including the pseudo-left Counterfire leader, John Rees; the Unite union's chief of staff, Andrew Murray; and Weyman Bennett from the SWP. There were video messages from Galloway and former London mayor Ken Livingstone. Rahman told the audience that Rabina Khan had been selected to carry on his legacy and would stand in the June 11 election. Her anointment was greeted rapturously.

Suggestions that pseudo-left groups would put forward their own candidate were abandoned. Reports are that in Tower Hamlets TUSC, the SWP vetoed the Socialist Party's proposal to stand a mayoral candidate. Anyone who refused to unite around Khan was deemed to be guilty of complicity in the racist Islamophobic witch-hunt against Rahman. This was ridiculous, given that nearly half of Labour's councillors are of Bangladeshi descent and Bethnal Green and Bow MP Rushanara Ali was born in Bangladesh. Rahman had appointed a 100 percent Bangladeshi and Muslim cabinet.

Left Unity, another pseudo-left outfit, said of Khan, "Rabina has a strong left-wing record. As cabinet member for housing in Tower Hamlets she has overseen the building of thousands of new social and affordable homes, and the investment of millions of pounds in refurbishing council housing. If successful she would become the first elected female Muslim mayor in Britain."

Robbins gushed, "Lutfur Rahman's administration has reinstated EMAs [Education Maintenance Allowance for 16-19-year-olds], maintained Council Tax Benefits and

celebrated St Patrick's Day and LGBT culture and...Rahman took a courageous and principled position to oppose the EDL [English Defence League]."

Such claims are dubious. Under Khan's five-year term as housing supremo, just 4,000 affordable homes were built—the vast majority by housing associations and private developers. Only a handful were constructed by the council. Virtually all the money for refurbishments has come from central government funds. The Rahman administration did not "reinstate" the EMA. In 2011-2012, the council topped up £328,350 from the government with £130,400 to provide £400 to just 704 students.

Khan has made it clear where her priorities lie, with her manifesto promising, "The first thing I will do if elected as Mayor of Tower Hamlets is sit down with the Department for Communities and Local Government's Commissioners."

After months of declarations that the Rahman administration, in which she played a leading role was blameless, she now accepts the "governance failures in certain areas" identified in the PWC report and that "addressing these must be our first priority." While making various promises about the future, she does not address the £100 million in cuts proposed last year that identified 25 areas of public services. These will have a drastic effect on the most vulnerable, including mental health, home care, children's homes, nurseries and the elderly.

The pseudo-left's claim that the best that can be hoped for is the election of a thoroughly compromised character like Khan is a reflection of their own rightward evolution, the substitution of identity politics for class politics, and the conviction that workers, including Muslims, can't be won to socialist policies.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact