

# Pakistani students organise for democracy

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During the 1960s, radical student movements broke out in countries across the world. Unlike in Europe, North America or Australia, Pakistan's student movement proved strong enough to overthrow a government.

Pakistan's National Student Federation (NSF) led the huge protests in 1969 that led to the downfall of the hated Ayub Khan dictatorship.

The example was not lost on the Pakistani elites. US-backed dictator Zia Ul Huq heavily repressed student groups after he took power in 1977, banning the NSF.

The ban on student groups was kept in place by formally "democratic" governments in the 1990s.

However, radical Pakistani students who took part in the mass movement that toppled the Pervez Musharraf dictatorship in 2007 have now revived the NSF.

*Green Left Weekly* spoke to the Punjab convener of the new NSF, Muhammad Arfan Choudhary.

"Students have played a vital role in the political movements in Pakistan", Choudhary said. "The campaign against Musharraf politicised students."

He said student action committees sprung up in 2007 on many university campuses, despite the government ban.

"But these student action committees were local. They were not interconnected, but emerged independently. They had one demand — end the dictatorship."

The committees mobilised thousands to take part in the big protests sparked by lawyers' demands for an end to military interference in the legal system. The lawyer's movement rapidly grew into a mass challenge to the military regime.

A national meeting of student committees was held in Faisalabad in August 2008 and decided to form a new federation. "We took the decision to revive the name NSF."

Choudhary said: "Now, we have connections in all provinces. We have groups in 12 cities. Most public sector universities have [an NSF presence]."

The formation of the new NSF coincided with the lifting of the ban on student organisations by the new government, led by the Pakistan People's Party (PPP).

But Choudhary said the legal status of the NSF is still tenuous. A key campaign of the student group is to overturn a 1993 Supreme Court ruling that confirmed the ban on student organisations.

Despite the PPP's promise, elections for student bodies on universities are still to be held. "The NSF is calling for a constitutional amendment to legalise student groups."

Another key NSF campaign is to lower student fees to allow more working-class and poor Pakistanis

attend university. Past governments have taken advantage of the ban on student organisations to repeatedly raise fees.

The group also actively supports the broader struggles. The NSF had a large contingent at the January 29 10,000 strong workers and peasants Faisalabad protest.

Choudhary said the new NSF gains a lot of inspiration from the proud history of Pakistan's radical student movements.

In the 1940s, the main student organisation was the Democratic Student Federation (DSF), formed by members of the Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP).

In 1953, the DSF led large protests against a student fee hike. It also campaigned against the decision to make Urdu Pakistan's sole national language, as only a small minority of Pakistanis spoke it fluently .

The state used force to crush the movement, and the CPP and DSF were banned. In the mid-'50s, DSF veterans went on to helped to form the NSF, which launched its anti-dictatorship campaign in 1968.

When the regime fell, many NSF members supported the PPP. Some NSF leaders took positions in the new government.

Choudhary said the PPP government "carried out reforms under working class pressure and gave some rights to unions and made some land reforms. But [it] also began to carry out repression too."

Many NSF members became disillusioned with the PPP government. But the 1977 military coup dealt the student movement a decisive blow, which de-politicised students.

The new NSF seeks to rebuild the influence of Pakistan's student movement in the struggle for full democracy and equality.

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