

# Pakistan's little-known communist movement

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**Communism in Pakistan: Politics and Class Activism 1947-1972** by Kamran Asdar Ali, London/New York: I B Tauris, 2015; pp 304, \$80.

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The words communism and Pakistan do not appear together all that often. Literature on progressive politics in Pakistan is so sparse that only the keenest observers of the country's political scene are aware of its history and/or the contemporary state of the Pakistani left. Which makes anthropologist-cum-historian Kamran Asdar Ali's *Communism in Pakistan* a must-read for anyone with an interest in going beyond the caricatures of beards, bombs and burqas that dominate scholarship on Pakistan.

## Threat to Muslim Pakistan

Pakistan is the only country in South Asia in which communist parties have always remained outside the political mainstream—and not by choice. The country's early political leadership chose to become a virtual satellite of the United States, proudly trumpeting its status as a "frontline" state against communism. It did not take long for the allegedly irreligious perversions of communists from being projected as one of the biggest threats facing Muslim Pakistan. By 1951, the Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP) was officially banned.

Notwithstanding these ominous beginnings, the book reveals that communists—their ideas, political mobilisations and personal relationships with the powers-that-be—were actually important players in Pakistan's political scene in the formative years. While the book includes a chapter on the 1972 labour movement in the industrial centre of Karachi, it is primarily a historical study that deals with the theoretical debates within the communist left in the lead-up to and aftermath of the partition in 1947, as well as the trials and tribulations of major communist personalities in the first decade or so of Pakistan's existence. Ali unearths a substantial material—including party literature, circulars and position papers, as well as police and intelligence reports from both the British and early Pakistani state—to put together a compelling narrative, albeit one that still suffers from significant gaps.

## **International debates**

The story begins with the topsy-turvy history of the Communist Party of India's (CPI) understanding of and position on the so-called "nationalities question" in the last years of the British Raj. Ali notes at least three clear U-turns in party policy. Initially suspicious of Muslim nationalism, the CPI started to reconsider its stance following the collapse of the Soviet-Nazi non-aggression pact in 1942 and the Communist International subsequent adoption of the "People's War" line. The CPI's response was to distance itself from the All-India Congress's "Quit India" movement and thereby move closer to the All-India Muslim League's pro-British position. In short, the CPI acquiesced the notion that Muslims were a distinct nationality within India, and even instructed its cadres in Muslim-majority regions to join or at least work closely with the Muslim League.

However, in the lead-up to partition, disagreements within the party started raising their head again. The partition plan was eventually endorsed and the creation of Pakistan accepted, but the formal party line was to once again shift on the occasion of the CPI's Calcutta Congress held in February 1948, barely six months after the end of the Raj.

There was no question of re-establishing an undivided India—the left now concerned itself with challenging what were considered—on both sides of the new border—reactionary regimes serving the interests of imperialist powers. However, the state of Pakistan and the propertied classes that propped it up could not be confronted by a party based in what was now a different country; the CPP was thus established. Party delegates designated as secretary-general, Sajjad Zaheer, a scion of landed aristocrats from the Urdu-speaking heartland of North India, whose relatives and many close friends occupied positions of power in the post-Raj political order.

It was, both literally and figuratively, unchartered territory. Here was a new state carved out of the western and eastern-most regions of British India, the political leadership of which comprised predominantly migrants from North India. The communist left resolved that this new political formation would serve only to reinforce the exploitative dictates of the departing imperialist power, and sought accordingly to attack the reactionary edifice of state and class power. Yet, in a startling historical parallel, the newly constituted CPP was also led by individuals lacking any moorings in the society they wished to transform. Two other personalities are identified by Ali as being given the task of building the CPP in the new state—Sibte Hassan and Mirza Ishfaq Beg—both of whom were also migrants from Uttar Pradesh and Bhopal, respectively.

As it sought to strike down roots in the new state, the leadership of the CPP—and Sajjad Zaheer, in particular—many a time took refuge with friends and family situated at the very highest echelons of state power. Ali documents many such personal relationships, complicating our typical understanding of what in most historical accounts of Pakistan's earliest years is a monolithic state apparatus committed to impeding democracy and ingratiating itself with the US. This complication aside, Zaheer and his comrades faced incessant repression, confirming that, individual exceptions notwithstanding, state elites had little tolerance for the fledgling left movement.

And despite all of its weaknesses, the movement did constitute a genuine threat to the powers-that-be. Most prominent in literary and journalistic circles—due in large part to Zaheer and other CPP leaders' association with the Progressive Writer's Association—the left challenged a unitary state that denied its constituent ethnic-nations meaningful political voice, whilst also vowing to take on and dismantle a "feudal" class structure backed by Western imperialism.

## **On questions of culture**

Among the quirks of this otherwise straightforward leftist narrative was the opposition to literary figures like Saadat Hasan Manto, whose works were attacked by numerous left critics for propagating pessimism and even “immorality.” The latter were willing to accept the multilayered depictions of social mores by Manto, but could not countenance the absence of a “fix” for society’s ills. Ali argues that the communists emphasised a “historical materialist lens and the primacy of social structure to undermine Manto’s empathy for individual experience.” In doing so, the Pakistani left reflected the Cold War orthodoxies of the global communist movement.

Perhaps, what was more problematic about this posture was that it situated the progressive literary camp—unwittingly or otherwise—in proximity to statist discourse, particularly vis-à-vis the imperative of establishing a “new” Pakistan founded upon correct moral principles. Ali notes how the progressives competed with “non-progressives” such as Hasan Askari and M D Taseer in asserting a vision for the future, although he does acknowledge that the latter ultimately associated themselves with the “official” position on “national” culture, whereas the progressives were vilified and eventually evicted from the cultural mainstream.

## **Military in politics**

Surely the biggest question mark about the CPP’s historical role in Pakistan’s early years, however, is whether or not it systematically colluded with disgruntled elements in the Pakistani army to foment a military coup. The so-called Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case gets a significant mention in Ali’s narrative, and the impression one gets is that, all things considered, there was never any formal approval issued by the party leadership to be party to a coup.

Yet there is little doubt that there was contact between Sajjad Zaheer, other prominent affiliates of the CPP like Faiz Ahmed Faiz, and officers in the Pakistan army. The idea of supporting a coup was doubtless discussed within the party hierarchy, which is to suggest that at least some of the leadership is likely to have been in favour of the endeavour. But Ali also clarifies that these flirtations were just that—and the subsequent criminalisation of the CPP by the authorities under the guise of sedition charges was not at all commensurate with the party leadership’s “offences.”

Of course it was not just in Pakistan that leftist revolutionaries contemplated a radical overhaul of the social order through the agency of military men. Lenin’s revolution was at least partially successful because the Bolsheviks had infiltrated the Czarist services. Amongst the contemporaries of Sajjad Zaheer and Pakistan’s early communists were Gamal Abdel Nasser and his “Free Officers” in Egypt. Libya and Ethiopia were among other countries that also boasted “revolutionary” army officers who overthrew regimes backed by Western imperialist powers. The most well known of today’s revolutionaries is the 2013-deceased Hugo Chavez, who was a junior officer in the Venezuelan army when he first challenged that country’s oligarchy in 1992.

Whether or not the left in other parts of the world still considers “progressives” in professional militaries potential allies, Pakistani leftists would—or at the very least should—now balk at even the suggestion. The role that the country’s generals have played over the past seven decades is unambiguous—they have thwarted any and all attempts to institutionalise even the most harmless form of bourgeois democracy and have also been instrumental in exacerbating ethnic tensions within society at large, given the Punjab-heavy composition of the army and bureaucracy.

All-powerful militaries like those in Pakistan pose a challenge to radical theory alongside political

practice inasmuch as armies are never representatives of one particular class per se. There are some on the left—mostly those affiliated with pro-Chinese currents—that have argued that Pakistan is a “feudal” society and the military is only powerful to the extent that feudal lords patronise it.

In fact, if landlordism—calling it feudalism opens up another debate altogether—continues to haunt modern-day Pakistan, then at least part of the explanation is that military rulers have patronised landed scions who might otherwise have been greatly disempowered by the forces of history. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is the Ayub Khan regime which otherwise depicted itself as the vanguard of industrialism, but ended up effecting what Hamza Alavi famously called land reform “in reverse.”

## **State suppression**

It was indeed during the Ayub Khan regime that the contradictions of a “modernising” authoritarian regime and the imperatives of an also “modernising” left movement came most dramatically to the fore. Part II of the book—which has only two chapters—chronicles the tribulations of the party in the aftermath of its banning. One chapter is dedicated to the story of arguably the first martyr of the Pakistani left—Hassan Nasir—who was killed in police captivity in 1960, barely two years after Ayub Khan took power.

Nasir, like Zaheer, was of impeccable elite pedigree. He hailed from an aristocratic family in the former princely state of Hyderabad Deccan, and left his wealth and influence behind to build the CPP in Sindh, and particularly in Karachi, where he settled. Ali provides the important backdrop for Hassan Nasir’s life and work, noting that after 1954 most communists worked “underground” within either trade unions and student fronts, or in the National Awami Party (NAP), which brought leftists together with ethnic-nationalists seeking to challenge the unitary state structure.

Nasir was only 20 when he was given major responsibility in the CPP’s underground structures, and was also the office secretary of the Karachi wing of the NAP when martial law was announced in October 1958. Ali provides limited details about Nasir’s political activities, only noting by way of testimonies of other organisers with whom Nasir worked that he was deeply involved in organising industrial workers in Karachi through the 1950s. Most of Ali’s focus in this chapter is on Nasir’s final arrest in 1960—he was apparently in and out of jail in the preceding years as well—and his eventual death in the torture chambers of the infamous Lahore Fort. When Nasir’s mother came to take her son’s body back to India, she was unable to recognise the exhumed remains, and eventually refused to accept that the mangled corpse was her son. She was to return to Hyderabad Deccan without a body.

Ali spends some time discussing the evolution of left politics in the wake of Nasir’s death, including the impact of the Sino-Soviet split that led to the break-up of the NAP into separate factions, and similar splits within the left-wing National Students Federation (NSF). Sectarianism continued to haunt the Pakistani left for many decades afterwards, notwithstanding different factions’ principled resistance to state and class power. Ali does hint at the relative favour garnered within ruling circles by pro-Chinese leftists, especially after 1962 when the Ayub regime started to name China as its most reliable ally.

Yet no segment of the Pakistani left was able to maintain significant bases of support in society after the Bhutto years (1972–77). By the time the Cold War ended, communist and socialist parties had already suffered serious fragmentation—the trauma of the Soviet Union’s collapse served only to confirm just how nominal the left had become.

## Contemporary Left

In recent times this historical trend has been somewhat bucked, and the Awami Workers Party, which was formed in late 2012 and brought together almost all factions of the Cold War left, currently offers the best hope for progressives seeking to challenge the forces of reaction which are, by any measure, formidably organised in contemporary Pakistan.

Nevertheless, it will be some time before the left can pose a substantive challenge to the established order. The 1990s was a “lost decade” of sorts insofar as an entire generation of young people remained largely unexposed to leftist ideas, and left organisations started to stagnate as a result of a lack of youth within their ranks. This shortcoming has since been acknowledged and is slowly being corrected.

A related concern is the fact that analyses of state, society and the global political economy from the 1970s and 1980s continue to inform the ideas and practice of too many leftists. The mainstreaming of gender, ecology and other issues that must be central to socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is an urgent task, just like the need to recognise “new” forms of class struggle.

There is, however, little doubt that Pakistan’s contemporary and future leftists will continue to contend with a bloated security apparatus, as has been the case for most of the country’s 68-year existence. In fact, the bogeyman of terrorism has allowed generals to concentrate more power in their hands than ever before, thanks in large part to the imperialist powers—both Western and Eastern—that continue to engage with Pakistan and the wider region in a typically myopic fashion.

## Military democracy

Any radical transformative project in the interests of Pakistan’s long-suffering working people, ethnic and religious minorities, and women would have to be premised upon a challenge to the military establishment. Which should mean a minimum level of cooperation with mainstream parties that also remain subservient to the uniformed “guardians of Pakistan.”

However, the democratic project in Pakistan has always been compromised by those political forces that have wilfully chosen the patronage of the military over the countervailing power of the people. For instance, it is widely believed that cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan (and his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf) has been secretly liaising with the men in khaki to pressurise the government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. More generally, pro-establishment politicians litter the ranks of virtually all parties, thus rendering much of the democratic struggle an eyewash.

This is all to suggest that the Pakistani left faces a formidable task. But Ali’s study of the early years confirms that the left has always been swimming against the proverbial tide. One can only hope that today’s progressives learn of this long history, both for what it teaches us about ourselves and those that seek to keep the oppressed locked in chains.

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\*<http://www.epw.in/book-reviews/little-known-communist-movement.html>

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