

Pakistan: 50 Years of the 1968-69 Revolution - Students, workers, peasants...

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Fifty years ago this land witnessed the most glorious moments of its history. Pakistan's virgin proletariat and the oppressed classes were storming heavens. They had entered the arena of history and were determined to take their destiny in their own hands. Revolutionary periods are historical exceptions. They don't occur every day. Such an amazing revolutionary torrent had swept across the country from November 7th, 1968 till the fall of the formidable dictatorship of Ayub Khan on March 26th, 1969. It had challenged the state and system and victory of a socialist revolution was on the horizon.

The upheaval that erupted in the aftermath of the events of 6 and 7 November could have become for Pakistan, what the 1917 revolution was for Russia. The revolutionary storm that engulfed Pakistan for the next 139 days began a few kilometres from Rawalpindi in front of the Government Polytechnic College, on Peshawar Road, where a student's demonstration was violently assaulted by the state forces that sparked this revolutionary inferno. Such was the ferocity of this mass revolt that it shook the corridors of power from Islamabad to Delhi and Washington.

The contradictions of the unevenness and combined nature of socio-economic patterns of Pakistan's belated capitalist development, with a rapid advance in the growth rates under the Ayub regime that could not be translated in society's generalised socioeconomic uplift. The explosion of these contradictions ignited the mass revolt. By January 1969, the uprising in West Pakistan had spread to every major city of the country. The people's consciousness had taken a leap with the revelation that the path and strategy of workers strikes and class struggle could be the way forward for their emancipation.

Fright of the imperialists was clearly evident from the diplomatic dispatches of their embassies in Islamabad. A dispatch from the British High Commission in Rawalpindi on 29 January 1969 gave a stark warning to London:

"In any case, many young army officers are likely to be attracted by Bhutto's 'doctrines' and personality; a Young Turk movement, joining hands with his civilian followers to seize control of the Army and put Bhutto in power, may not be beyond the bounds of possibility... There is a danger to British economic and commercial interests. Moreover, a revolutionary situation will develop... This cannot fail to be related to the developments in West Bengal..."

As in many other revolutions of the twentieth century, students played the role of the initial spark that kindled the flames of the revolution. Workers joined students and unemployed youth in all the major cities of West and East Pakistan in a protest movement that rapidly created a revolutionary situation.

Traditional labour leaders that operated within the parameters of government's labour policies and institutional framework were left behind. In several strike action committees, which sprang up

during the struggle, young radicals who until then had been largely limited to student politics during a period of severe restrictions on labour and political activity of the 1960's now joined and interacted with workers for a common cause. The overt political character of the 1968-69 movement in this united action was all the more effective and qualitatively different in terms of creating organizational links between Marxist intellectuals and workers. In some cases, this interaction led to the formation of new labour organizations with politically and socially revolutionary goals.

Bhutto saw this as an opportune moment and intervened in the movement in November 1968. He told Stanley Wolpert, a few years later,

"When I arrived at the Hotel Intercontinental (Rawalpindi) I found the whole Mall area thick with tear gas smoke. About one-and-a-half hour after my arrival... I received a telephone call from the Polytechnic institute informing me that the police had opened fire there resulting in the death of a student, Abdul Hamid. I was told that the students were insisting on taking the body... to the President's House and that they wanted me to lead the procession."

After his tumultuous reception in Rawalpindi, Bhutto proceeded on an eventful journey to Lahore by train accompanied by student leaders of Rawalpindi. Thousands of arisen masses had thronged to the Railway stations along the route to get a glimpse of the red-flagged rail caravan. This was Bhutto's first visit to the historic city after being deposed by the Ayub regime. Wolpert wrote "He had come back to Lahore, more than two years after his eloquent silence and tear-filled eyes spoke to a hundred thousand or more young men who gathered at the railway station hanging from precarious perches like bats in midday, filling every platform, tightly locked together on every step just to catch a glimpse."

Bhutto sensed that the masses were in a mood to break all barriers and go to the end. But it was not Bhutto that was directing the movement it was the revolutionary ferment that was radicalising Bhutto. Being able to feel the pulse and analyse the character of the movement had the advantage of being able to strike and intervene just at the right moment. On 13 and 14 November most left-wing leaders including Bhutto were arrested. These acts of the regime further inflamed the revolutionary inferno. Widespread protests by lawyers on 15 November sealed the judicial system.

A general strike closed down Rawalpindi for a day in late November 1968, and the police continued to clash with students and workers, while the army watched warily from its barracks. Little more than a week later another general strike paralyzed Dacca on December 7. Police fire drew young Bengali blood, and the radical communist Maulana Bhashani, whose National Awami Party was ideologically modelled on Maoist doctrine, issued a call for the complete shutdown of East Pakistan in mid-December. Mujib's Awami League had no choice but to follow Bhashani's call— East Bengal came to a standstill.

The mighty General Ayub Khan saw that his days in power were numbered. He could speak nowhere in public without getting shot at or causing a riot. Still, he thought the army, might not be powerful enough to beat India, but he thought that its strength was more than sufficient to quell the uprising. He was far from reality, as it might have been able to fight a short war with India but to curb a precipitously defiant revolutionary upsurge was beyond the capacity of the army to crush. Paradoxically had the military, at that stage been used to suppress the revolt, the army itself would have disintegrated splitting into class lines.

On 28th November the PPP and NAP organised joint demonstrations. On 8 December Ayub Khan visited Dacca where students protested against him. Two students got killed in police shootings. On 10 December 1968, there was a countrywide strike of journalists on the call of the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ). On 13 December there was a general strike throughout East Pakistan.

On January 20, 1969 a Communist student leader, Asad, was killed in police firing at Dacca and his death intensified the student militancy in the country. On the next day, the first protest demonstration by Doctors was held in Lahore with radical demands. On January 24th a general strike closed down Lahore. A 24-hour curfew was imposed on the city and the army was deployed to control the people. However, elsewhere, students and thousands of people took to the streets in defiance of the curfew.

A day later there was a huge protest demonstration in Karachi. There was rioting and many buses were set on fire and curfew was imposed in the city. The office of the Karachi Development Authority was attacked and set on fire. Along with Karachi, curfew timings were increased in Gujranwala, Lahore, Dacca and other cities. On 26 January three civilians were killed in Dacca and Narayanguj while breaking the curfew. In this movement, a total of 239 people were killed and hundreds injured in East and West Pakistan. In the provincial metropolis of Lahore, students attacked the offices of a pro-government newspaper and set it on fire. Over 50,000 students and workers marched through the streets, burning cars, battling with the police and laying siege to government offices. On 26 January, as night fell in Lahore, a large fire was set to the building that housed the Supreme Court of Pakistan. It was turned to ashes to express the mass hatred towards the judiciary due to their role of being servile to the dictatorship and its oppression. The majority of the Supreme Court's judges during the ten years of Ayub Raj had only endorsed the draconian laws and actions of the regime against the left activists, students and workers. The wrath of the ordinary people against the state's most cunning institution took its revenge by burning the Supreme Court to ashes.

On February 21st Ayub declared that he would not be a candidate in the scheduled 1970 presidential election. This bolstered the revolution even more. This announcement marked the passing of the Movement into a new momentous phase. It coincided with the first protest action by lower-ranking government servants. A short strike by the clerks of West Pakistan Government Secretariat at Lahore soon spread through the ranks of Class III and IV civil servants. Within days it involved the staff and low-paid employees of government hospitals, the Public Works Department and the Posts and Telegraph Department, as well as more autonomous government bodies, like the Road Transport Corporation, the National Bank of Pakistan and the Water and Power Development Authority. In Lahore, Karachi and Rawalpindi, students stopped cars that pulled out leading civil servants and forced them to shout anti-Ayub slogans – not a single bureaucrat refused. In Lahore, the most senior police official was stripped of his uniform and forced to march at the head of a large student demonstration. On 13 February, over 30,000 railway workers marched on the main streets of Lahore, having persuaded their leaders to organise a demonstration. They carried red flags and chanted: "Destroy capitalism", and "Keep religion out of politics". On the same day, five other demonstrations by workers took place and traffic came to a complete stop.

In Lahore, the workers and students had taken control of the city. The correspondent of The Times (London) reported on 14 February 1969: "With the entry of the working class into the revolt, hitherto limited to students and political parties, observers are beginning to doubt whether the government or the opposition can control the forces unleashed in Pakistan." On the same day, the students impaired the rail signals near Lahore railway station, disrupting train services.

During this period, organized labour became much more active and militant. The leaders of the major unions and federations in West Pakistan joined together to form the Joint Labour Council (JLC). The JLC organized the first week of March as the workers' "demands week" and called for a nationwide general strike on 17 March 1969. This was a brilliant success as the whole country came to a cessation. The electrical workers cut off power to the President's House, Pakistan Civil Secretariat and the GHQ (General Head Quarters) of the Army in Rawalpindi. According to Bashir Bakhtiar, president of the West Pakistan Federation of Trade Unions (WPFTU), "It was our signal to Ayub Khan: If you don't go, we will keep this up." The workers' consciousness had taken a massive

leap to new unforeseen heights.

March was a month of massive labour struggles throughout Pakistan, as factory workers resorted to gherao (siege tactics), jalao (burning) and takeovers of factories. The strikes by government employees brought both the ponderous government bureaucracy and much of the state's functioning to a virtual halt. The entry of the workers into the arena of revolution, their discovery of the efficacy of political methods to win higher wages, and their wider demands for the right to strike, the nationalization of industry and overthrow capitalism in Pakistan ushered in the most ideologically advanced phase of the movement increasingly represented by Bhutto and Bhashani, continued to insist on the immediate ousting of Ayub, but it also began to emphasize more revolutionary themes.

Pakistan was dominantly an agriculture-based country in 1968-69. Even with the rapid industrialisation under Ayub Khan in the preceding decade, majority of the population lived in the countryside. The revolutionary message from the cities and towns was resonating throughout the rural heartlands louder and louder by the hour. It was having a deep impact on the minds, psyche and nerves of the oppressed peasant masses.

Soon a gigantic peasant struggle had erupted and joined the revolution raging in the cities and towns. Peasants in both East and West Pakistan came out to challenge the authority of feudal lords in their villages. The popular slogan of the movement was

"He who tills the land, shall reap the harvest".

There is a long history of peasant struggles in Pakistan. This created a tradition of Kissan (peasant) conferences that gave a certain organisational base to the peasant movement. The first Kissan Conference was organized in March 1948 and held in Tehsil Toba Tek Singh of District Lyallpur (now Faisalabad). In this conference, the Punjab Kisan Committee was re-organized and founded, attracting peasants from rural and urban areas across the province.

In the wake of the outbursts of the revolutionary wave, Kissan conferences were held in different parts of Punjab with the 1970 Toba Tek Singh Kissan Conference gaining a historical significance. This conference on 22-23 March was the most successful in the history of Pakistan. According to veterans of the Pakistan Kissan Committee, half a million peasants from all over the country participated in that conference. The most prominent people who spoke at that conference were Maulana Abdul Hameed Bhashani, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Ahmad Rahi and Mairaj Muhammad Khan.

The rural masses had begun to whirl around it like a tornado. The landlords were shivering in their shoes. The capitalists who were subservient to American and Western capital felt as if the blood in their veins was drying up. The mullahs were seething with indignation because now mortal human beings were trying to change what they preached was the will of God. The bureaucracy was always a worshipper of the past; its ideals and views had remained unchanged since the time of the East India Company.

The revolution had cut across the vacillations and reluctance of the middle classes. Lawyers, doctors, engineers, artists, scientists, intellectuals, poets, journalists and people from all departments of society's professionals and middle classes that are used by the ruling classes in 'normal' times to perpetuate their rule, had come decisively onto the side of the proletarian revolution. Quite characteristically they jumped onto the bandwagon of the rising tide of revolutionary ferment. One of the most important organized struggles at that time was that of the journalists.

On 25 March 1969, the revolutionary upsurge forced Ayub Khan to resign. In his parting speech, he

made a historic confession. He had faced the wrath of the revolution and hence elaborated its character and power more precisely. He said in his last presidential statement,

"This is the last time I am addressing you as President of Pakistan...the administrative institutions are being paralysed. The mobs are resorting to gheraos (siege) at will and get their demands accepted under duress.

(...) It is my desire that the political power should continue to be transferred in a constitutional manner. In the conditions prevailing in the country, it is not possible to convene the National Assembly. Some members may not even dare to attend the Assembly session.

(...) It hurts me deeply to say that the situation now is no longer under the control of the Government. All Government institutions have become victims of coercion, fear and intimidation. Every problem of the country is being decided in the streets."

General Yahya Khan, the Commander in Chief of the Army, was handed over the power. The reformist and compromising policies of Gen. Yahya's regime also reflect pressures from within the armed forces. One factor of waging the 1971 war and whipping up Pakistani chauvinist frenzy was that it was from West Pakistan where the bulk of the armed forces came. Ayub's resignation was not just to distract the revolution in society but was also intended to dissipate the dissent within the Army. Dissent within the armed forces was also an important factor that had instilled fears in the hearts of the ruling classes and their imperialist bosses. The army in the last analysis is a reflection of the society from which it is derived. The situation was so explosive that the ruling elite had to actually go to war and was even prepared to lose half of the country to preserve and safeguard the rule of capital. A more subtle proof of which side the garrison was on, were reflected in the results of army's postal ballots collected from Military Cantonments in the 1970 elections. The wave of revolutionary socialism that was linked to the PPP had penetrated the consciousness of these workers in uniform. More than 60 per cent of the soldiers and lower ranks of the armed forces voted for socialism. The officer corps was divided and did not vote for any one political party. The GHQ was concerned about security and political implications that might result if the military's vote was made public. The GHQ wanted to shield the troops from the left wing ideological tendencies engendered during the volatile election campaign.

Many events during the movement showed a change in the thinking of ordinary military personnel. In one area of Karachi, over a thousand students marched on the house of a prominent member of Ayub's Muslim League who, seeing the crowd approaching, shot and critically wounded a student. The next day 10,000 students marched onto his mansion. An army unit was stationed outside, with a young officer in command. He asked students what they had come to do? The reply was blunt: "they had come to set fire to the mansion". After the students explained their reasons to the young army officer he suddenly ordered his unit to move to another area and the mansion was burnt down.

There were several other incidents of army officers refusing to fire at the charging crowds and processions of the workers and the students. In some cases when the army and police deployed to crush the protests actually sided with the rebelling masses. Several middle-ranking army officers were court marshalled for their support of the revolutionary demonstrations and strikes. Such was the revolutionary fervour that heavily armed troops had to retreat when the workers' demonstrations defied their authority with the unprecedented determination and valour of the downtrodden workers unleashed by the revolution. The army's red tape had feared correctly that the revolutionary uprising as a serious threat to the army's structures and the system.

But one of the mightiest revolutions of the modern epoch had lost its way as the leadership and the PPP had no revolutionary perspectives, strategy or preparations for an insurrection and taking power. The bourgeois politicians and most left leaders tragically supported another Martial Law imposed by Yahya Khan. Ayub had retired to his son-in-law's estate at Swat, but he continued to

meet Yahya Khan. More than three months of hard and sustained struggle had been betrayed. Another army takeover had taken place. Marx wrote in *The Eighteenth Brumaire Of Louis Bonaparte*:

“Instead of society having conquered a new content for itself, it seemed that the state returned to its oldest form, to the shamelessly simple domination of the saver and the cowl.”

The movement of the students during the revolution had electrified society. The workers were taking over factories and the economy was paralysed. The agrarian workers and poor peasants had seized the landed estates of the feudal aristocracy and set fires to their luxurious palaces and mansions. This movement in the countryside was a huge reservoir of support and source of courage for the youth and proletariat in revolutionary struggle. The involvement of the soldiers and lower ranks of the armed forces would have made the decisive strike to overthrow this system of coercion and exploitation. Had a revolutionary party been created in advance and trained to mobilize support of the military's ranks then the inevitable outcome would have been a victory for revolutionary socialism.

History is witness to the fact that in most revolutions the leadership does not decide the directions of the movement. Alterations in party policies reflected the moods of the masses. The spontaneity of such movements and left-populist and accidental leaderships has often led revolutions to end up in tragic defeats. It's the dynamics of the mass movement that these populist leaders follow and are radicalised with its upsurge. Only one exception exists; the October Revolution of 1917 in Russia; where the Marxist leadership of Lenin, Trotsky and the Bolsheviks had developed in advance the perspective, cadres, organisational structures to decide the methods and determine the course and fate of the revolution. This harsh reality was summed up in Trotsky's brilliant dictum:

“The historical crisis of humankind is reduced today to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership”.

In ordinary times, the social, political, cultural and psychological conditions of society are shaped by the reactionary ethics and sociocultural norms of the ruling classes. However, revolutions smash this social order, transform societies and the course of history. The movement of 1968-69 stands out above all other uprisings of the youth, workers and oppressed in Pakistan. These toiling masses have endured long periods of oppression and exploitation. Time and again they have risen in revolt. The official tale of Pakistani society, from politics to morality and history has been that of the ruling classes and their toadies. The oppressed toilers in Pakistan have a mission to accomplish. They have a historic pledge to redeem. The task of a victorious socialist revolution has to be realised; now above all for the survival of civilisation as the dark shadows of barbarism loom large on Pakistan's horizon. The working classes and youth have made enormous sacrifices in this class war. Innumerable silent soldiers have fought and perished in the ferocious battles to win this class struggle. For generations, they have suffered, yet they rise again to overthrow this yoke of capitalist slavery and exploitation. They shall rise once more—sooner rather than later— to achieve a revolutionary victory. This is the verdict of history.

Lal Khan

P.S.

• Asian Marxist Review, November 7, 2018:

<http://www.marxistreview.asia/pakistan-50-years-of-the-1968-69-revolution/>