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The Rise and Fall of the Maoist Movement in Pakistan

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‘More than Maoism: Rural Dislocation in South Asia’ is an ISAS research theme focusing on socio-economic, political and security dimensions of “Maoist movements” in South Asia. The institute conducted a closed-door workshop on the research theme, and the presentations are being put together as a series of ISAS Insights and ISAS Working Papers. This is the third paper in this series.

Abstract

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Maoist ideas gained considerable popularity and influence in left politics and the labour movement, and made an impact on Pakistani mainstream politics, which was out of proportion to its political strength in the overall balance of power. Neither class structure nor the ideological and political composition of the state apparatus warranted any such advantage to Maoism. Clues to it are to be found in the peculiar power game over security and influence going on at that time between several states in that region and, perhaps, more crucially in the internal political situation surrounding the rise to power of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1971-77). His fall from power, the coming into power of an Islamist regime under General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq (1977-88), and the Afghan jihad spelled disaster for leftist politics. In the 1980s, Maoism faded into oblivion.

Pakistan came into being on 14th August 1947 as a result of the failure of extended negotiations mainly between the Indian National Congress (a secular-nationalist party predominantly under modern-educated Hindu leaders) and the Muslim League (an exclusive communal party headed by modern-educated Muslims) to evolve a formula over sharing of power in a united India.² The

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² Ahmed, I., ‘State, Nation and Ethnicity in Contemporary South Asia’ (London and New York: Pinter Publishers, 1996).

partition of India was attended by the biggest forced migration in recent history. More than one million (current estimates suggest a figure as high as two million) Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs lost their lives and some 14-17 million fled their homes in search of safe haven.

In the north-eastern and north-western Muslim majority zones that were separated from the rest of India and given to Pakistan, there was hardly any industry. Pakistan received only 9.6 per cent of the total number of industrial units (1,414 out of 14,677); 5.3 per cent of the electric capacity (72,700 kw out of a total capacity of 1,375,000 kw); 6.5 per cent of the industrial workers (206,100 out of a total of 3,141,800); and only 10 per cent of the known mineral deposits.³ Most of the industrial units were small-scale, usually simple home-based production. The economy as a whole was agrarian and in terms of class structure, various categories of peasants and landowners constituted the bulk of the population.

Radical peasant uprisings had begun to appear in India from the beginning of the twentieth century. Some were inspired by general anti-colonial patriotism while others came increasingly to be associated with the Communist movement. The Sikh peasantry in the Punjab was – for a number of cultural, historical and socio-economic reasons – more receptive to radical ideas than Hindus and Muslims and a disproportionately large number of Communist activists and militants had emerged from amongst Sikh ranks in the Punjab.⁴ It is interesting to note that the Communist Party of India (CPI) had supported the demand for a separate Pakistan, describing it as a popular movement of the Muslim masses for national self-determination.⁵ Consequently many Muslim cadres of the CPI had joined the Muslim League and during the election campaign used the public meetings as a platform to propagate the idea of Pakistan as a peasant paradise free from the exploitation of Hindu moneylenders and landlords. At the time of partition, no formal decision to split the Communist Party of India had been taken. However, the annual congress of the CPI at Calcutta in December 1948, which was attended by delegates from Pakistan, decided to split the party. Some prominent Communists of Muslim background were instructed to emigrate to Pakistan so as to help organise the Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP).

However, in independent Pakistan, hostility towards communism became a centrepiece of state ideology. In future all sections of Muslim society were to work together rather than confront one another.⁶ A popular discourse drawing on notions of an Islamic order and an Islamic state began to be churned out by Muslim *ulama* (clerics) and rightwing newspapers. Quite simply the argument that came to characterise the discussion on the ideological foundations of Pakistan was that it was an Islamic state and, therefore, there was no place for atheistic ideologies in such a polity.

In early March 1951, Prime Minister Liaqat Ali Khan announced that his government had uncovered a plot involving some officers of the armed forces and leading members and sympathisers of the Communist Party to overthrow the government. It was alleged that the

³ Gankovsky and Gordon-Polonskaya, (1972), pp. 99-100.

⁴ Josh, B., 'Communist Movement in Punjab (1926-47)' (Delhi: Anupama Publications, 1979). See also Singh, G. 'Communism in Punjab' (Delhi: Ajanta, 1994).

⁵ Adhikari, G., 'Pakistan and National Unity' (Bombay: People's Publishing House, 1944).

conspirators intended to 'create commotion in the country by violent means and to subvert the loyalty of the Pakistan defence forces'.⁷ The accused were alleged to have met several times in Rawalpindi to plan the insurgence. Among the civilians arrested was Sajjad Zaheer, the General Secretary of the CPP; Faiz Ahmed Faiz, a famous poet and editor of the radical Lahore-based English-language newspaper, the *Pakistan Times*; and Muhammad Husain Ata, a prominent trade union leader. The accused were tried on camera by a special tribunal. The charges could not be proved against them. The court, however, sentenced the civilians to four years in prison and a fine of Rs. 500 each. The military officers received various sentences ranging from three to seven years. The ringleader General Akbar Khan was sentenced to a long exile of twelve years.

In any event, the prevailing policy of imposing restrictions on the activities of the leftists was made even harsher. However, the Communists and pro-Communist intellectuals continued to play a part in Pakistani politics through their support to the autonomy movements of the dominated provinces of Baluchistan, East Bengal, North West Frontier and Sindh. In the provincial elections held in East Bengal in March 1954, a united front constituted by a number of parties opposed to West Pakistani domination won 223 seats out of a total of 237 seats reserved for Muslims. These developments created panic among the ruling Muslim League government. It retaliated by alleging that the United Front and the CPP were involved in a conspiracy to undo the unity of Pakistan by supporting secessionist movements. Consequently, a ban was imposed on the CPP in July 1954.⁸ Its offices were closed, records and publications impounded and all assets confiscated. A countrywide crackdown on party cadres took place. On the general political, intellectual and cultural fronts, harassment and intimidation of leftists was intensified.

Given the polarisation in international politics in the wake of the Cold War, Pakistan's repression of leftists won it considerable acclaim from the United States (US). Pakistan joined Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954 and the Baghdad Pact in 1955, and later Central Treaty Organization (CENTO). In October 1958, the Pakistani armed forces led by the Commander-in-Chief, General Mohammad Ayub Khan, overthrew the civilian but unelected government of Prime Minister Feroz Khan Noon and imposed martial law.

A view that the military was a major modernising agent in Third World countries, especially if a country lacked functioning democratic institutions and an autonomous national bourgeoisie, enjoyed significant currency in the conventional development literature produced during the 1960s. Ayub Khan was an apt example of such a developmentalist regime. Operating within an anti-communist ideological framework it sought vigorously to promote the industrial sector (on an important substitution basis) and to modernise agriculture. Land reforms with a very high ceiling were introduced: 200 hectares of irrigated and 400 hectares of un-irrigated agricultural land in West Pakistan and in East Pakistan the ceiling was raised from 33 hectares to 120 hectares.⁹ The

⁶ Mahmud, K., 'Pakistan Mein Mazdoor Therik' (The Labour Movement in Pakistan) (Lahore: Maktab-e-Fikr-o-Danish, 1987), p.6.

⁷ Gankovsky, Y. V. and Gordon-Polonskaya, L. R., 'A History of Pakistan (1947-1958)' (Lahore: People's Publishing House, 1972), p.175.

⁸ Callard, Keith, 'Pakistan: A Political Study' (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1957), pp.73-4.

⁹ Khan, Mohammad Ayub, 'Friends Not Masters' (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1967).

objective was clearly to create a strong class of prosperous farmers rather than liquidate landlordism by distributing land among poor peasants.

Pakistan's defence planning has always been based on the assumption that the main threat to its security comes from India. The 1962 Sino-India war the US had expressed support for India and begun to provide it with armament, which greatly annoyed the Pakistani leaders who argued that a militarily strong India will pose a greater threat to Pakistan. On the other hand, the Chinese government had expressed political support for Pakistan during the India-Pakistan war in 1965. China had even threatened India and supported the Kashmir people's right to self-determination.

Under the circumstances, Ayub Khan's Foreign Minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, worked out another strategy than dependence only on the US. Pakistan was to develop closer ties with the People's Republic of China.¹⁰ The latter responded warmly to such overtures since its own policy was dictated by an overriding concern to prevent the spread of Soviet influence in regions close to its borders. In turn, the Soviet Union backed India in different manners, including military and economic aid. The US looked upon the Sino-Pakistan courtship with apprehension, but its paramount concern to contain Soviet influence in South Asia suggested that the emerging relation between China and Pakistan could be a useful counter-weight.

The 1960s was also a period when the Sino-Soviet political and ideological animosity (which had been brewing for a long time) came to a head. It culminated in an irrevocable split in the international Communist movement in the early 1960s. In almost all countries outside the Soviet bloc, the Communists split up into pro-Moscow and pro-Beijing parties. While the pro-Moscow parties advocated peaceful strategies for advancing the socialist cause, their pro-Peking counterparts stood for militant armed struggle.¹¹ Given the exigencies and compulsions of patriotism and nationalism in modern politics, a Communist party which looked towards the same ideological centre (either Moscow or Peking) for inspiration as the one with which the state in which it was based had good relations enjoyed the advantage of working more freely than the one associating with a centre with which the state had estranged relations. Thus, while being pro-Soviet in Pakistan was considered unpatriotic, being pro-Chinese was not. In India, the situation was the reverse.

The emerging Sino-Pakistan liaison provided a leeway for a new type of radical politics in Pakistan: one could mix Maoist ideas of peasant revolution with hostility towards the Soviet Union, condemning it as a social-imperialist capitalist restorer, as Mao preached.¹² To it, if one added anti-India rhetoric, then a sufficiently confusing and contradictory theoretical concoction was ready. The authorities were willing to tolerate such developments as long as they remained confined to small groups.

¹⁰ Bhutto, Z. A., 'The Myth of Independence' (Lahore/Karachi/Dacca: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp.131-61.

¹¹ Banerjee, S., 'India's Simmering Revolution: The Naxalite Uprising' (London: Zed Books, 1984).

¹² 'Chairman Mao's Theory of the Differentiation of the Three Worlds is a Major Contribution to Marxism-Leninism' (Peking: Foreign Language Press).

Meanwhile Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who had fallen out with Ayub Khan after the 1965 war, entered Pakistani politics as a major contender for power against his former patron. He founded the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in late 1967. The PPP quickly won a large following among intellectuals, lawyers, journalists, workers, peasants and students. Many Maoists and radical trade unionists also entered the PPP fold. However, many powerful landlords and some smaller industrialists also joined it.¹³ The ideology of the PPP was a blend of radical rhetoric borrowed from Maoist jargon, nationalist fervour directed against India, democracy and Islamic socialism. Not surprisingly, the element which distinguished the PPP's ideology from that of the Maoists was the notion of Islamic socialism. It generated controversy and confusion both within the PPP and outside. While the radical wing of the PPP made it, its battle-cry for social revolution, the more moderate sections denied that it meant anything more than a concern for social justice in accordance with Islamic traditions. Outside the PPP, the conventional *ulama* and the propertied classes mounted a powerful campaign to damn the notion of Islamic socialism.

Pakistan broke up in December 1971 after the East Pakistan-based Awami League won an absolute majority in the Pakistan parliament in the 1970 general elections – winning 162 seats out of 300. It had a majority to form the government but was overruled by the West Pakistan power elite. Negotiations between the military government, Awami League and the PPP failed. On 25 March 1971, the army struck with all its might against what it perceived was a veritable all out rebellion. The result was a long civil war which culminated in the intervention of the Indian army on behalf of the Bengali resistance. The Pakistani army was defeated and East Pakistan became the separate independent state of Bangladesh in December 1971.¹⁴

In the truncated Pakistan now confined only to West Pakistan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto came to power. Emboldened by the PPP's coming into power, radical trade union leaders intensified militant activities in 1972. *Gherao* and *Kabza* were attempted in many industrial areas of Punjab and Sindh. The workers established their own management committees. In some industrial areas and residential colonies the workers virtually took over the task of administration, including law and order, and prompt provision of relief and justice.¹⁵ At the same time, the government ordered stern action against Maoist groups active among the peasants.

From the second half of the 1960s, along with populist left-leaning politics of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and his PPP, many of whose cadres and a few leaders such as Mairaj Muhammad Khan professed Maoist sympathies, more radical revolutionary Maoists established their presence in the trade unions and university campuses. The Pakistan International Airlines trade union was firmly with Maoists and their student wing, the Nationalist Students Federation (NSF), emerged as a powerful force on the Karachi University Campus. In Punjab, the Nationalist Students Organization (NSO) represented Maoist ideas. Maoists with some presence in the industrial areas and towns formed the

¹³ Waseem, M., 'Politics and the State in Pakistan' (Lahore: Progressive Publishers, 1989).

¹⁴ Ahmed, Ishtiaq, 'State, Nation and Ethnicity in Contemporary South Asia' (London and New York: Pinter Publishers), pp.222-3.

¹⁵ Mahmud, Khalid, 'Pakistan Mein Mazdoor Tharik' (The Labour Movement in Pakistan) (Lahore: Maktab-e-Fikr-o-Danish, 1987), pp.61-4.

Pakistan Socialist Party led by C. R. Aslam and Abid Minto, while those with a peasant-orientation went on to form the Mazdoor-Kissan Party (MKP).

The MKP was founded in 1968. It was a product of the split in the National Awami Party (NAP) into a pro-Moscow, West Pakistan-based wing led by Wali Khan, son of the Frontier Gandhi Abdul Ghaffar Khan, and the East Pakistan-based Maulana Bhashani. In West Pakistan, the Maoists broke away from the National Awami Party (NAP) (Wali Khan) and founded the MKP under the leadership of Afzal Bangash, a Pukhtun like Wali Khan. In 1970 Major (Retd) Ishaq Muhammad from the Punjab joined it along with his supporters.¹⁶

The MKP was able to launch a number of peasant resistance initiatives but the most spectacular was the one in the North-West Frontier Province among the Pukhtuns. The Pukhtuns were the only nationality in Pakistan in which all sections of society bore firearms. As a result, there were militant confrontations between landlords and peasants in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Fighting continued during the military regime of General Yahya, and from 1972 onwards when in the NWFP a coalition government led by NAP (Wali Khan) and an Islamist party, the Jamiyat-Ulama-e-Islam was in power while Bhutto's PPP ruled at the centre, and in Punjab and Sindh.

The NAP-JU government supported the landlords and banned the MKP. One of the most spectacular clashes between the peasantry and the state took place in July 1971 at Mandani. A heavily-armed force consisting of 1,500 policemen clashed with a smaller force of MKP cadres, the poor and landless peasants. Another struggle took place when nearly 8000 police and militia fought MKP fighters and the local peasants. The struggles in the Hashtnagar area of the NWFP liberated an area of approximately 200 square miles and inspired similar movements all over Pakistan.¹⁷

In Punjab, the MKP was involved in similar initiative in the western and southern regions where big landlordism was strongly entrenched. However, police repression in such areas proved too strong for the largely unmarked MKP cadres and peasant activists. Many of them were jailed and tortured. Bhutto's fall from government in 1977 brought into power a rabidly rightwing government under General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq. After Pakistan joined the Afghan *jihad* in 1979, militant Pukhtuns were absorbed by the campaign to oust the Russians from Afghanistan. In the rest of Pakistan, leftists were also greatly marginalised as the state embarked upon comprehensive Islamicisation of state and society.

The MKP was an anti-imperialist party open to all progressive individuals. At its core was a hardcore communist leadership consisting of theorists, trade union activists, and peasant leaders and organisers. The MKP allied itself with China and supported its line in international politics as

¹⁶ Salim, Ahmad, 'Peasants Lands Rights Movement of Pakistan', *Islamabad: Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI)* (2008), pp.43-44, www.sdpi.org/research_Programme/human_development/wlr/wlr_Peasants%20Land%20Rights_final.pdf. Accessed on 12 April 2010.

¹⁷ 'The Rebel Road, History of the Communist Mazdoor Kissan Party', <http://redtribution.wordpress.com/history-of-the-communist-mazdoor-kissan-party/>. Accessed on 12 April 2010.

well as on the question of the revolution in Pakistan. The peasantry was declared as the main force of the revolution armed with Marxism-Leninism and Maoism. Major Ishaq wrote a number of articles and plays dealing with the oppression of the people in general, while highlighting in particular, the very sad plight of the indigenous people. The Punjabi faction of the MKP led by Major Ishaq was openly anti-Indian and subscribed to the view that the Soviet Union was a social imperialist superpower. The Afzal Bangash factions however were more practice-oriented and somewhat wary of taking an open stand against the Soviet Union. However, after the Communists captured power in Afghanistan, all factions of the MKP welcomed it and supported it as a progressive revolution. Such developments resulted in repression against the MKP being redoubled by the Zia regime.

The MKP split into different factions in the late 1970s. Major Ishaq and Afzal Bangash became bitter rivals, both accusing each other of betrayal. Following the death of Chairman Mao Tse-tung, China abandoned its revolutionary fervour. That had a profoundly demoralising effect on the Pakistani Maoists. The Pakistani state did not function even as a formal bourgeois democracy and the few years of Maoism's popular appeal were a product of a regime coming into power under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto that was pro-China and also flirted with ideas of socialism. All that became irrelevant in the 1980s.

The Pakistani Maoists survive in several small factions. There are also a number of MKPs. The Maoists continue to pledge a commitment to a peasant revolution based on Mao Tse-tung's ideas. They cooperate with other leftist and democratic forces in the struggle for workers' and peasants' rights. In recent years, they took part in some peasant resistance struggles on military farms but Maoism is not an important force in Pakistani politics today.

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