

American Institute of Pakistan Studies  
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Final Statement

The dissertation project that I proposed seeks to interrogate the vicissitudes of leftist politics in Pakistan between 1947-71. A doctoral fellowship from the American Institute of Pakistan enabled me to undertake archival research in the Netherlands and Great Britain. I aim to write a social history on the “defeat” of the left in 1968; the main object of inquiry is thus the left itself. The failure of the left in 1968, I argue, requires going back to other moments between 1930-71 that were flashpoints for the left, the decisions made at these various junctures complicate the idea that the collapse of the left was due to contingent factors alone. However one might first stop to ask: What or who is the left? For the moment, it will suffice to characterize the “left” as multi-faceted in its organization, but fundamental to the self-conception of leftist groups are activities oriented towards workers, trade unions, peasants, students and socialists.

It is this organizational structure that Pakistan inherited in 1947, which forced the military government of General Ayub Khan to abdicate his position in 1968-69. The history that has been unveiled by the archival holdings at different sites (see Final Report for detail) forms a concrete picture of the constitution of the left in colonial India and its re-constitution in East and West Pakistan in the post independence period. While I focus on 1968 as a watershed moment for the left, a close examination of the 1930s and 40s illuminates an acute problem of revolutionary Marxism in South Asia informed by the rise of “Stalinism” and “Maoism”—as ideologies on the left—which came to inflect the developments of the left in the 60s. Furthermore, the forestalled, uneven character of industrial development in Pakistan, its relationship to the United States at the height of the Cold War, the extreme deprivation everywhere in spite of the bountiful “Green Revolution” all had an enduring impact on left democratic groups that had sought to develop alternatives to these kinds of socio-political contradictions, but which were blindsided by historical developments.

Thus the historical heritage of the preceding “Old” left (of the 30s) as well as the unfolding of the socio-political dynamic in the post 1947 period had significant consequences for the events, movements and thinkers of the “New” left (of the 60s). A critical examination of party literature, slogans, memoirs, will allow me to evaluate certain basic assumptions shared by the “New” left, which will, in turn call into question the necessity of the present day Pakistan. With this broad array of archival documents in hand, in this dissertation I will attempt to address salient historical questions: 1) What inspired and informed this “New” left? 2) Why did the “New” left attach so much importance to separatist politics (e.g., language, ethnicity, gender, etc.) by the late 60s in East and West Pakistan? 3) Why was it necessary to organize separately? 4) How did ideas of “self-determination” and/or “nationalism” affect and inform politics of the various leftist organizations? 5) Despite such separatism, how was the common “movement” understood? 6) How did the “worker-student” alliance work itself out? And finally, how was the political defeat understood by the “New” left itself? I hope to explore these questions by reading this history “against the grain” (as Benjamin put it in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 1940), attempting to grasp past moments of defeat and failure on the Left not as given but rather in their unfulfilled potential, regarding the present as the product not of historical necessity, but rather of what happened that need not have been.

There is an extreme dearth of historical scholarship on the Pakistani left. Political histories do exist, but are short-sighted in their scope as they tend to emphasize individual parties, programs or focus on histories of labor that only document conditions of a particular industry, which leave questions about the historical failures of democracy in Pakistan unanswered. My dissertation will serve to fill this lacuna in the field of Pakistan Studies.