

# WORKERS' ORGANIZATIONS IN PAKISTAN

## Why No Role in Formal Politics?

Christopher Candland

**ABSTRACT:** Why have Pakistani workers failed to transform their evident street power into sustained influence in formal politics? Throughout South Asia, worker' organizations formed alliances with political parties, political parties formed workers' organizations, and governments incorporated worker' organizations into state consultation machinery. With the exception of Pakistan, in each of the countries of South Asia, representatives at these workers organizations have become members of parliament and cabinet ministers. In India, a workers' representatives even became president. Why have workers' representatives been almost completely absent in Pakistani governments? This essay argues that Pakistan's traumatic creation — one of the twentieth century's greatest humanitarian disasters — unleashed ruling class insecurities that were unfavorable to workers' organizations. The managers of the new state demanded centralized power. Authoritarian colonial institutions were ready at hand. Pakistan's international alliance with U.S.–anticommunist alliances led to the suppression of workers' organizations and precluded their influence in formal politics. The ruling classes targeted workers' organizations. Pakistani governments ensured that workers' organizations were excluded from formal politics. Before concluding, the essay considers whether military governments are necessarily inimical to workers' organizations.

Why have Pakistan's workers exhibited considerable influence through street and factory protest but almost none in formal politics? Workers' organizations have obtained (or had once obtained) a significant measure of political power in India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, and Nepal, but not in Pakistan. Organized workers in Pakistan have had little or no influence on political parties or the state.<sup>1</sup> Pakistan's contrasting experience allows us to see how specific politi-

cal practices shape workers' organization and thus help us to understand better workers' organization elsewhere, especially where economic conditions are similar but political practices are different.

This essay begins by considering why Pakistani workers generally fail to mobilize on class lines but tend to mobilize on the basis of ethnicity, language, and religion. The first part of this essay considers the political forces that undermined workers' organizations in Pakistan and the common origins of these forces. These germinated and took root before Pakistan's creation and were fully mature in the 1950s when Pakistan joined the U.S. anticommunist South-east Asian Treaty Organization (Seato) in 1954 and Pakistan's military first took formal control over the state in 1958. The second part of this essay addresses two questions: Why was labor repressed under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's professedly pro-worker government (1972–1977)? Why are military governments seemingly hostile to workers' organizations?

### Workers and Workers' Organizations

The subject of this essay — workers' organizations — refers to the organizations of the nonagricultural labor force and, overwhelmingly, to male workers. This focus is a result of definitions for counting and legally recognizing workers and their organizations. Pakistani unions — the only organizations permitted under law to represent workers before employers and government — are the domain of workers from larger manufacturing sectors in nonfarm activities. These are predominantly male, salaried, government-recognized workers. There are other kinds of workers. Women, of course, staff a vast world of work, including paid and unpaid home-based work. But, of the officially recognized Pakistani labor force — regular (i.e., legally recognized) paid employees — fewer than 15 percent are female.<sup>2</sup> In comparison, 29 percent of the officially recognized Indian labor force are female.<sup>3</sup> Whether women are employed in this recognized labor force or elsewhere, they also work for their families. Family demands and social sanctions often make it near impossible for women to organize unions.<sup>4</sup> Pakistan's female workers are not well represented in Pakistani unions.<sup>5</sup> Agricul-

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1. The only cabinets to include pro-working class politicians were the 1973–1975 cabinet, which included Tariq Aziz, Mubashir Hasan, Miraj Khalid, and Miraj Mohammad Khan, and the 1999–2002 cabinet, which included Omar Asgar Khan. These were not representatives of workers' organizations but did defend workers' rights.
  2. The figure is calculated from data provided by the International Labour Office's online database of labor statistics (Laborsta) and is available online at <http://laborsta.ilo.org/> (accessed on 6 August 2006). The value reported is for 2002 and is derived from Government of Pakistan 2006.
  3. The figure is reported by the ILO's Laborsta online database of labor statistics: <http://laborsta.ilo.org/> (accessed on 6 August 2006). The value reported is for 2000 and is derived from Government of India 2001.
  4. See Perveen and Ali 1993 on barriers to women's participation in unions.
  5. Khaniz Fatma, a Karachi based labor leader, is a noteworthy exception. See Akhtar 1992 on women's participation in factory work and unions in Karachi.

tural workers, for their part, are prohibited from forming unions in Pakistan. This is not to say that these workers' organizations in Pakistan entirely exclude agricultural or "informal" sector workers. Some of Pakistan's labor leaders began by organizing *bidi* (hand-rolled cigarettes) and power-operated weaving loom workers. But the focus of this essay is workers in the "organized sector" (a Pakistani and Indian term for registered factories with relatively large numbers of employees).

### Class and Other Worker Identities

In most of South Asia, workers tend to organize on the basis of a shared political ideology. In Pakistan, major trade union federations are identified with specific ethnic or linguistic communities. It might appear, then, that the ethnic, linguistic, or religious bases of social power in Pakistan have limited the ability of working class movements to develop into a broader, national working class consciousness. Students of working class solidarity in Pakistan have lamented the manner in which workers organize along ethnically and linguistically exclusive lines. But, under some conditions, appeals to a common ethnicity, language, or religion might be the most effective (or only) avenue for working class assertion. The movement for Pakistan itself — a country for South Asian Muslims — reflects the way in which working class demands can be expressed through nonclass identities. Muslim landless agricultural workers, especially throughout Eastern India, embraced the movement for Pakistan as a struggle against economic servitude and exploitation. To the Muslims of India who supported Pakistan in the early 1940s Pakistan was appealing as a peasant and industrial working class utopia.<sup>6</sup>

Class solidarity everywhere — including working class solidarity — overlaps with solidarities based on ethnicity, language, nationality, and other non-class-based identities. Recovering the concept of class for political economy analysis requires attention to the conditions under which these nonclass identities strengthen or undermine class identity and one another. It is not sufficient to consider only how nonclass identities undermine class consciousness. Pakistani workers, sometimes with great effectiveness, organize on the basis of ethnicity, gender, language, and religion. These nonclass social bases for workers' organization have facilitated workers' collective action. Social solidarity on the basis of ethnicity, gender, language, or religion can be fierce. At the same time, nonclass social bases for workers' organization can prevent a broader foundation for wider working class solidarity and greater political influence.

Why have ethnicity, language, and religion taken on such importance in Pakistani workers' organizations? In workers' neighborhoods in Pakistan, as elsewhere in South Asia, residents need intermediaries to ensure the provision of basic services, for healthy relations with the police, and for the supply of jobs. In these neighborhoods, these intermediaries are representatives of distinct ethnic, language, and religious groups. Employment has long been made available

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6. See Hashmi 1992.

through jobbers, contractors, and other informal middlemen, working through channels within distinct ethnic groups. Negotiation and bargaining occurs mostly within informal structures defined by ethnicity and language. In this way, workers of the same ethnicity, gender, language, and religion form working class organizations. These community identities then become reinforced and transposed to the political level, where political elites are well trained in manipulating ethnic rivalries. Thus, working class identities are diverted at the local level and transposed into ethnic rivalries at the level of formal politics. Whether through Basic Democrats, as under Field Marshal Ayub Khan in the 1960s, through Zakat Committees, as under General Zia ul Haq in the 1980s, or through Union Councilors, as under General Pervez Musharraf today, the central government establishes the local level political structures. Labor brokers too are instruments of state power. Thus, even the articulation of working class interests (e.g., for employment and timely payment of wages) helps to solidify the informal power structures that maintain Pakistan's largely feudal system.<sup>7</sup> As labor activism emerges in distinct ethnic neighborhoods, patron-client relations determine the leadership structure. Leaders typically treat workers as clients, not as political allies. Unions are typically the creation of leaders who have loyal followings only among their ethnic group. Workers do not expect a democratic labor movement, but a leader who can produce jobs and deliver on workers' demands.<sup>8</sup>

The speed with which Pakistan was created and the ideological justification underpinning its establishment produced major obstacles to working class organization, specifically the displacement of more than 12 million people and promotion of a state-sanctioned religious ideology. The persistence of feudal relations and the government's legal controls undermined trade unionism. The Left was criminalized and internally divided.

The weakness of workers' organizations in Pakistan may appear to be overdetermined in the sense that more explanations are advanced than needed. But the determining forces all have a common origin: the centralizing and repressive practices of the ruling classes that controlled the state. The major obstacle to workers' representation in formal politics in Pakistan is a ruling class obsessed with its own security. This obsession led to the preservation of colonial instruments of control, anticommunist international alliances, and neo-classical economic ideologies. The opposition of the ruling classes — the bureaucratic and military elite — to workers' organizations is central to understanding why class identities, despite their importance to everyday social relations, fail to be replicated in formal politics.

Pakistani labor leaders and labor scholars share this perspective,<sup>9</sup> as I learned from more than a decade of close research on and participation with hundreds

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7. See Herring 1979, 520–25 and Herring 1983 for a discussion of the applicability of the concept and practice of “feudalism” to Pakistan.

8. I thank Karamat Ali for the points made in this paragraph. Interviews with Karamat Ali, Karachi, 25 December 1999 and 31 December 1999.

of workers and labor organizers in Pakistan.<sup>10</sup> Since 1991 I have conducted extensive interviews with dozens of labor organizers. I also tap a collection of interview transcripts conducted with senior trade union leaders in 1973 and thousands of Pakistan newspaper clippings related to labor published since 1947.<sup>11</sup>

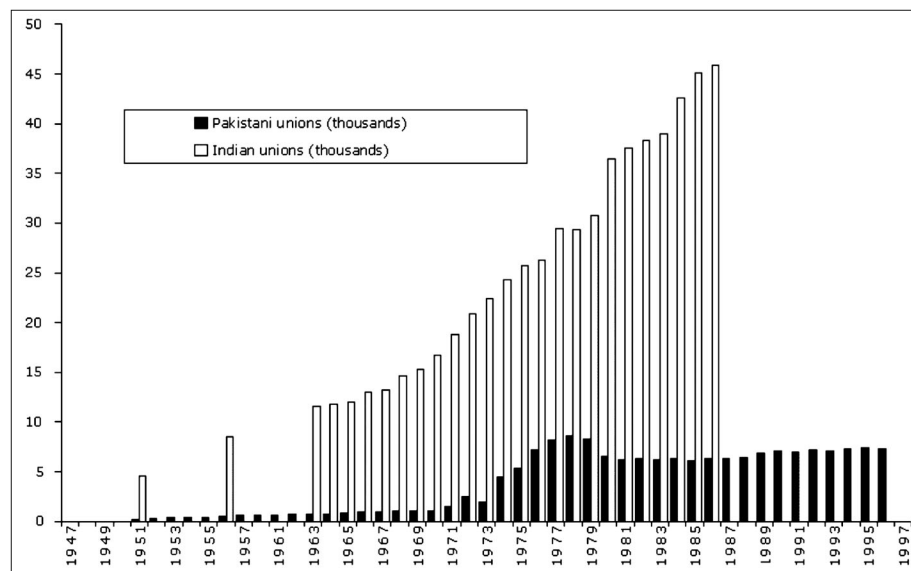
### Union Strength in Comparative Perspective

What can a comparison of trade union and union membership growth in India and Pakistan tell us about working class solidarity in Pakistan? India is a good comparative case for Pakistan because, while economic conditions are similar, state ideologies and political practices differ sharply.

The size of the Pakistani labor force is roughly one-eighth of India's, but as a percentage of the number of nonagricultural workers, the numbers of union members are roughly equivalent in both countries. In the early 1990s, 5.4 percent of India's nonagricultural labor force was unionized,<sup>12</sup> while 5.5 percent of Pakistan's nonagricultural labor force was unionized. Given the general encouragement of unions in India and the general discouragement (and occasional outright repression) of unions in Pakistan during each country's formative decades, this should be surprising. But we need to consider how reported statistics are derived as well as what these statistics mean. Indian trade unions provide their own figures. The Government of India reports these figures as received, usually without verification. A comparison of figures, verified by periodic Indian government tallies of union figures, reveals that Indian unions exaggerate their membership by approximately 90 percent.<sup>13</sup> Indian unions turn

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9. For excellent discussions of how the post-colonial state undermined working class formation in Pakistan see Alavi 1973, 1983, and 1989.
  10. I want to acknowledge here the generosity and insights of Khurshid Ahmed, Nabi Ahmed, Humaira Akhtar, Karamat Ali, Zulfikar Ali, Charles Amjad Ali, Usman Baloch, Riffat Hussein, the late Omar Asghar Khan, the late Saeed Pasha Lodhi, Farhat Perveen, Gul Rahman, and Muhammad Yaqub. Many of these workers and organizers I first met when participating in a national effort in 1992 to establish a Workers' Education Foundation in Pakistan.
  11. The interviews involved Nabi Ahmad, Mukhtar Ahmed, Imdad Ali, Choudhry Rehmattullah Aslam, Mohammad Aslam, Ibne Ayub, Zaheer Akhtar Beedri, Jamal Boota, Rehmatullah Choudhry, Abu Saeed Enver, Anis Hashni, Rifat Hussain, Saeed Pasha Lodhi, Attaullah Khan, Mehrab Khan, Mohammad Nizar Khan, Qazi Mohammad, Amanullah Khan Niazi, Saleh Mohammad Hayat Pasha, Niazi, S. Zafar Rizwi, Sobiha Shakil, Mohammad Sharif, Mohammad Sulaiman, Mohammad Tahir, Abdul Wahid, Khwaja Mohammad Wasim, Mohammad Yamin, Ismail Yousef, Riaz Haider Zaidi, and Syed Ayub Ali Zaidi. I copied the newspaper clippings kindly made available to me by the Dawn Newspaper Group. For elaboration on observations made in this essay and a fuller comparative discussion of Indian working class organizations, see Candland 2007.
  12. For details on these estimates and their sources, see ILO 1998. The estimate for India is for 1991. The estimate for Pakistan is for 1994.
  13. Candland 2007.

Figure 1: Pakistani and Indian Union Growth (in thousands) 1952–1997



Sources: Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Labour, Manpower and Overseas Pakistanis, *Pakistan Labour Gazette*, various issues and Government of India, Ministry of Labour, *The Indian Labour Yearbook*, various issues. Note: Data in pre-partition Pakistan are for West Pakistan only. Periodic changes to the definition of employment make it fruitless to trace over time union membership as a percentage of employment (union membership density). While data are available for later years these are derived in different ways than those for earlier years.

in more realistic figures following regular government verifications of their trade union center figures. At the same time, many unions submit no returns at all, resulting in the absence of these unions and their members from official figures. These two features of labor data collection in India — voluntary reporting and self-reporting — account for the relatively low numbers of unions and members and for the dramatic fluctuation in reported union membership in India. In Pakistan, in contrast, the Ministry of Labour, Manpower and Overseas Pakistanis collects and reports figures that it has verified through its mechanisms for recognizing unions and through its examination of named employees on union rolls.

Even perfectly reliable and comparable numbers of unions, union members, or industrial disputes, on their own, say little about workers' organizations. Statistics can disguise more than inform. The statistics in figure 1, for example, do not reveal that most Pakistani unions are unions in name but not in practice, as unions do not have the right to bargain collectively. Throughout Pakistan, fewer than two thousand unions have collective bargaining rights. Each of these unions is restricted to a single workplace. In India, in contrast, there is no mechanism for recognizing unions as the collective bargaining agent for workers, except in three states, Karnataka, Orissa, and West Bengal. (Workers in these states hold secret ballot elections.) In most of India, employers are inclined to negotiate with any union (of seven or more workers) that poses a credible threat to production.<sup>14</sup> These fuzzy rules in Indian industrial relations have led workers to protest

political party-based unionism. The upshot of these considerations is that the numbers — in figures 1, 2, and 3 — become meaningful only when interpreted in the context of the reported experiences of labor leaders and workers.

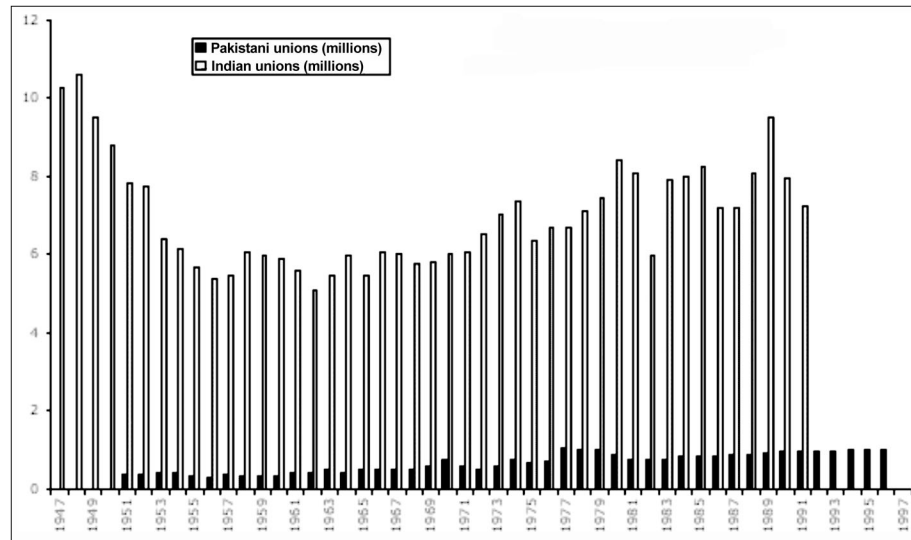
A sketch of political and economic developments in Pakistan from the perspective of labor leaders will be useful here. Pakistan inherited very little industry at Partition. The industrial labor force, accordingly, was very small. But it grew rapidly, as did unions and union membership. Between 1948 and 1955, unions and union members grew at a rate of 10 percent per year. At the same time, the ruling classes suppressed workers' organizations and denied workers' basic rights. Indeed, unions were not recognized as legal entities until 1959. The government often denied citizens the right to assemble. In 1958, President Iskander Mirza, rather than face the prospect of defeat in the general elections scheduled for 1959, asked the commander in chief of the armed services, Mohammad Ayub Khan, to assume power. The military obliged. The bureaucracy thereby maintained its influence in government by trading civilian government for military government.

While the martial law government initially succeeded in controlling workers and workers' organizations, workers grew militant. Pakistan's war against India in 1965 dampened workers' unrest, but only temporarily. In 1968, outraged over Field Marshal Ayub Khan's national celebration of his "first decade of development," factory workers gave teeth to a movement that forced the military to promise to hold what would be Pakistan's first general election. The elections led to the creation of Bangladesh out of East Pakistan and a short period of civilian government in West Pakistan. Before the military government arranged promised elections, it amended laws significantly, especially for workers and students. Workers and students were the base of the movement against military government during the 1968–69 popular movement. The military government promulgated the Industrial Relations Ordinance (IRO), which recognized — in principle — workers' rights to form unions and to bargain collectively. Under the IRO (discussed in detail below), unions and union membership grew in the initial years of the pro-worker government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. In 1975, Bhutto amended the IRO to stem the proliferation of unions. The amendment did reduce union numbers but did not affect membership growth. By 1975, the bureaucracy and the military recovered from their national disgrace in the debacle in East Pakistan and began again to assert themselves against workers' organizations. In 1977, Bhutto was replaced in a military coup d'état by General Zia ul Haq, who imprisoned union leaders and suppressed unions and union members during the eleven years he ruled. (He died in 1988.) The impact of these political and economic developments on unions, union membership, and industrial dispute trends can be seen in figures 1, 2, and 3.

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14. For a comparative study of labor institutions' impact on privatization patterns in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, see Candland 2002. I discuss the implications of the absence of a legal mechanism for recognizing unions as collective bargaining agents in Candland 2001, 2002, and 2007.

Figure 2: Pakistani and Indian Union Members Growth (in millions), 1947–1996



Sources: Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Labour, Manpower and Overseas Pakistanis, *Pakistan Labour Gazette*, various issues and Government of India, Ministry of Labour, *The Indian Labour Yearbook*, various issues. Note: Data in pre-partition Pakistan are for West Pakistan only. Periodic changes to the definition of employment make it fruitless to trace over time union membership as a percentage of employment (union membership density). While data are available for later years these are derived in different ways than those for earlier years.

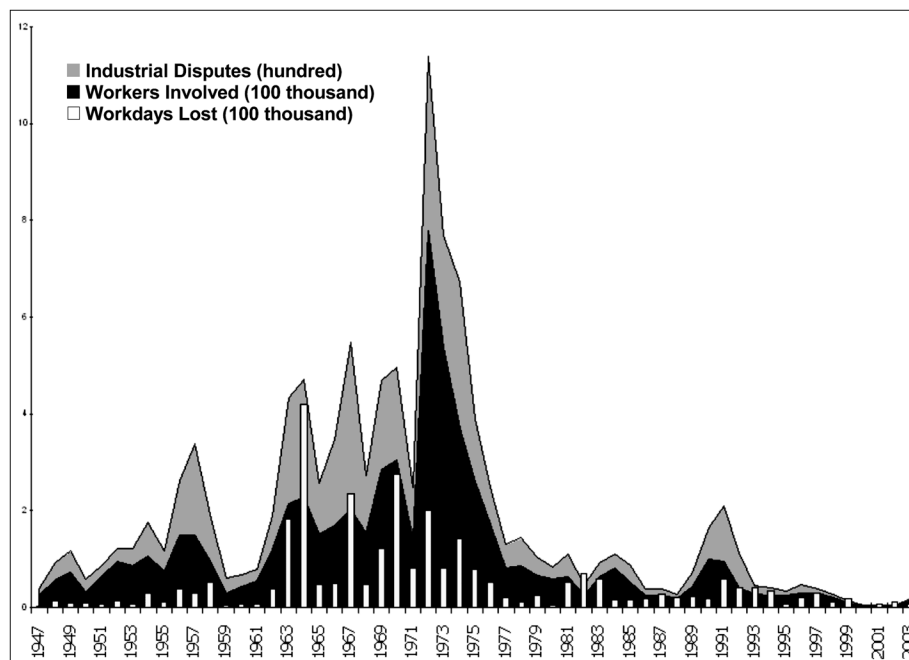
The origins of Pakistan’s anti-working class environment can be traced to social forces that emerged during the movement for Pakistan, which Yunas Samad insightfully refers to as “a brief moment of political unity,” and to the first decade of the new state.<sup>15</sup> The peculiarities of Pakistan’s precipitous creation produced powerful obstacles to trade unionism. The majority of industrial workers at the time of Partition were refugees and thus the basis of workers’ mobilization was predominantly cultural and not political or economic.

In India, unlike Pakistan, ethnic mobilization and working class organization are not generally in conflict because Indian governments and political parties have not been hostile (at least not consistently) to workers’ movements and organizations. The greatest obstacle to workers’ organization in Pakistan is government opposition to workers’ movements and organizations. Lacking institutions other than those of the colonial era, which was designed to control and extract resources from a subject population, the classes in control of the state — the bureaucracy, the military, and, until 1958, the Muslim League leadership — opted for a centralized approach to governance. The economic development strategies adopted by the ruling classes treated workers not as human beings but as factors of production. In contrast, Indian economic development strategies recognized the importance of workers and workers’ organizations. Indeed,

15. Samad 1995.



Figure 3: Pakistan Industrial Disputes, Workers Involved, and Workdays Lost, 1947–2003



Source: Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Labour, Manpower and Overseas Pakistanis, *Pakistan Labour Gazette*, various issues. Note: Data in pre-partition Pakistan are for West Pakistan only. The Government of India differentiates between industrial disputes caused by strikes and those caused by lockouts; Pakistan does not.

the Constitution of India itself confirms the importance of workers and workers' organizations to Indian democracy and development. Additionally, the government of Pakistan joined SEATO, the U.S.-backed military alliance that regarded worker activists and workers' organizations as potentially subversive. The involvement of the U.S. Federation of Labor-Confederation of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) and of the pro-United States International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) strengthened the state's effort to depoliticize the Pakistani labor movement. Let us examine these four obstacles to workers' solidarity — partition and migration, colonial institutions, anticommunist international alliances, and neo-classical development strategies — in greater detail.

### **Partition and Migration**

The precipitous partition of British India in August 1947 resulted in large-scale communal riots, the displacement of more than 12 million people, the severing of a once unified trade union movement, and the creation of two new mutually hostile states. Partition caused the loss of many leaders and rank-and-file activists in areas that were to become Pakistan. Urban workers came almost exclusively from eastern Punjab, the United Province, and other Muslim minority areas that would become part of independent India. As people who had lost their homes and livelihoods, the refugee working classes were susceptible to communal sentiments. In addition to being imbued with a communal con-



Labor-management administrator meeting with dockworkers in Karachi harbor. "Union demands include jobs for sons, in the case of the accidental death or dismemberment of workers, and dowry funds for daughters." (Credit: ILO/Jacques Maillard, 1985)

sciousness, these groups were largely dependent on the state for their rehabilitation. Having sacrificed greatly to join Pakistan, they readily projected themselves as more authentic Pakistanis. The Urdu-speaking community, for example, referred to themselves as *muhajir*, a reference to the flight of some of the earliest Muslims from Mecca to Medina.

After the Partition of the subcontinent, 20 percent of the population of West Pakistan consisted of refugees from the territory that made up independent India. India's population after Partition, in contrast, was about 1 percent refugees from the new country of Pakistan. More than 7 million Muslim migrants left territories that, by 15 August 1947, had already become independent India.<sup>16</sup> The impact of the immigration on Pakistan was overwhelming in urban areas. Many of Pakistan's major cities — Faisalabad, Gujranwala, Karachi, Lahore, Llyalpur, and Hyderabad — became immigrant majority cities by 1951.<sup>17</sup> Most industrial workers in these cities were refugee immigrants from India or immigrants from other areas of Pakistan. In Karachi, Pakistan's major industrial city, more than 57 percent of the labor force in 1959 were immigrants; more than 24 percent were migrants from other areas of Pakistan.<sup>18</sup> The migrant population continued to grow.

Further, the migrant labor force remains largely male and, consequently, the articulation of its demands is almost exclusively masculine. Union demands in-

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16. See Waseem 2002.

17. Ali 1983 66, citing Shaheed 1979; Addleton 1992, 33, citing Government of Pakistan 1951, 2–3.

clude jobs for sons, in the case of the accidental death or dismemberment of workers, and dowry funds for daughters.

The displacement of people at the time of Partition allowed religious and ethnic identity to undermine working class identity. The social stratification of workers is reflected in residential patterns in Karachi, Lahore, Hyderabad, and other centers of immigration, where there are Baloch, Pathan, and other ethnically defined residential colonies. Politicians and employers are skillful at exploiting and encouraging ethnic identities at the local level. To ensure that workers have minimal opportunity for collective action, employers hire workers who do not speak local languages or have access to local social networks. Coal miners in rural Sindh, for example, are Pathan migrants from the Northwest Frontier Province, who speak neither Urdu nor Sindhi, the languages of the region where they work. Therefore, none have access to local social networks. The workers live in barracks near the pits, far away from the nearest human settlements.

At the same time, labor protests have typically been organized and articulated along ethnic lines. In Karachi, for example, Pathan workers led many of the workers' movements. The basis of their mobilization, as we have noted, was predominantly cultural not political. Notions of community honor, rather than demands for political equality, predominated. The high level of mobilization over such culturally articulated demands was easily dissipated. Occasionally, working people have been able to overcome divisive ethnic identities and mobilize on the basis of class identity. Workers have demonstrated an ability to participate in collective action. The labor movement has evidenced a high degree of militancy and street power. But workers have not been able to sustain a high level of mobilization or convert that into representation in formal politics. Given the tight circumscription of labor by law, workers have typically expected little from trade union action. At the same time, the predominance of immigrants and migrants in the Pakistani economy can weaken workers' solidarity. As Karamat Ali has written

the migrant worker, once he decides to migrate, has already preferred to opt for an individual solution to improve his living conditions and therefore it would be a long time before he could realize the importance of collective action.<sup>19</sup>

The mass migration caused by Partition far more powerfully undermined workers' solidarity in Pakistan than in India.

### *Colonial Institutions of Government*

The government of Pakistan — the manager of the new state — was poised to create a centralized structure and a repressive approach to governance even before Pakistan was created. Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the All India Muslim League leader, chose to assume the office of governor general, a colonial-era institu-

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18. See Ali 1983, 139.

19. Ali 1983, 119.

tion, rather than to head the elected government.<sup>20</sup> For nearly a decade after independence, the government operated under the colonial Government of India Act of 1935. Government instruments of control — such as article 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CCP) banning public assembly — were used with great frequency from Pakistan's earliest existence. The Pakistan Army's annexation of the state of Khalat, now a part of Balochistan, was the act of a colonial power. Until 1951, the commander in chief of the armed forces was a British officer, and a British military officer served as the chief of the Pakistan Air Force until 1956. Colonial institutions were designed to extract local resources for the personal gain of public officials and to subject the population to military, police, and bureaucratic control, not to promote social welfare and economic development. These institutions remain strong in "postcolonial" Pakistan. The readiness of the government to abandon domestic interests to serve first the U.K. and then the U.S. government helped nondemocratic colonial institutions to become embedded in the Pakistani political economy.

In Pakistan's early years, the government made no effort to formalize industrial relations. The early 1950s, however, witnessed many strikes. Concerned about rising industrial unrest, especially in East Pakistan, the government adopted a two-pronged strategy. It announced its intention to meet workers' demands for better rights to organize while enacting legislation to control workers and to make unionization impossible. In February and May 1952, the government ratified two of the most important International Labour Organization conventions, the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize Convention, 1948 (number 87) and the Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (number 98). But with the introduction of the Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA) that same year, the only significant labor law in the pre-martial law period, large categories of workers were denied the right to collective representation in unions. The ESMA gives the government complete discretion to restrict or ban trade unions and collective bargaining in any industry deemed by the government to be essential to the welfare of "the nation," and it makes absence from or stoppage of paid or unpaid work in designated essential industries a penal offense. Work actions in almost all industries are proscribed.<sup>21</sup> No court has jurisdiction to entertain complaints of workers affected by the application of the ESMA.

Under the ESMA, which is still in effect today, agricultural workers are also prohibited from unionizing, as are workers in other "essential" service sectors, such as education. Given these legal prohibitions against union organizing, it is not surprising that Pakistan's union membership, as a percentage of the economically active population, was only 0.7 percent in 2000. In comparison, In-

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20. See Jalal 1985.

21. In addition to arms and ammunition, the Act prohibits unions in the production of cement, edible oils, electrical communication and broadcasting equipment, electricity, electrical equipment or appliances, glass and ceramics, chemicals, machines and precision tools, gauges, heavy engineering equip-

dia's union membership, as a percentage of the entire economically active population, was 1.7 percent in the same year.<sup>22</sup>

After Ayub Khan's declaration of martial law in 1958, labor laws were promulgated to formalize industrial relations and to control the labor movement through government regulation. For example, the 1959 Industrial Disputes Act, which superseded the colonial-era Trades Union Act of 1926 and the Industrial Disputes Act of 1929, made conciliation, arbitration, and adjudication compulsory, limited nonworkers (so-called outsiders) to no more than 25 percent of trade union offices, and banned unions from collecting funds for political activities. The laws for the regulation of industrial labor in Pakistan by 1959 can already be characterized as restrictive and repressive. Of course, Indian governments have also unleashed considerable oppressive power against Indian workers, but anti-worker violence has been much more the norm in Pakistan.

### *Anticommunist Alliances*

Pakistan's creation coincided with the onset of the cold war. The government of Pakistan opted to join the United States in an anticommunist alliance that promoted the repression of worker activists and organizers. Although the Communist Party of India supported the creation of Pakistan, communists in Pakistan were hounded. Mohammad Ali Jinnah himself blamed communists for the language riots in East Bengal in March 1948. The government banned the Communist Party of Pakistan in 1954. By 1958, the possession of communist literature was a punishable offense, and university libraries were purged of communist literature. At the same time, U.S. governmental and quasi-governmental organizations provided plentiful anticommunist labor education and training materials.<sup>23</sup> As Karamat Ali has argued, the government controlled workers not only in factories (by allowing owners of industry to deny workers the right to bargain collectively), but outside factories as well through its anticommunist ideology.<sup>24</sup>

With the strategic relationship between Pakistan and the U.S. governments and militaries in place, U.S. influence over Pakistan's trade union movement increased considerably. Pakistan's incorporation into first bilateral and later multilateral military and economic alliances with the United States led to the suppression of left-oriented trade unions associated with the Pakistan Trade Union

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ment, petroleum and mineral oils, minerals, non-ferrous metals, paper, cardboard and pulp, pharmaceuticals, industrial alcohol, preserved and prepared foods, rubber, scientific and mathematical instruments, seafood, ships, lighters, sugar, leather goods, textiles, and tobacco.

22. Economically active population is from the ILO's Laborsta online database of labor statistics: <http://laborsta.ilo.org/> (accessed 4 June 2006). Claimed union members, for 1999 in India and for 2000 in Pakistan, are from the Government of India, *Manpower Profile* and from Government of Pakistan, *Pakistan Statistic Yearbook*, supplied by ILO on 4 June 2006. Note that the figures here include agricultural workers, unlike the union and union membership density figures cited above.

23. Ali 1983, 117.

24. Ibid.

Federation and forced the creation of a depoliticized, anticommunist federation, eventually named the All Pakistan Confederation of Labor (APCOL). The Brussels-based International Confederation for Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) established offices in Karachi and Lahore, extended financial and other assistance to APCOL, and sent Pakistan trade unionists on tours to the United States to encourage them to emulate U.S.-styled “independent” (i.e., apolitical) trade unionism. Minister of Labour Abdul Malik ran APCOL, the country’s largest federation, during the height of industrial and union growth in the country.<sup>25</sup> At first, the government enforced trade union unity through APCOL, but with the advent of the cold war international trade union movements began to divide along ideological lines. In the 1960s, the APCOL fractured, resulting in a half dozen federations. The ICFTU, like the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), accepted the affiliation of rival federations in Pakistan.

Major ideological differences in Pakistan’s labor movement can be traced to pre-independence disagreements of the kind that split the Indian Federation of Labour, under the leadership of the socialist M. N. Roy, from the more radical All India Trade Union Congress. But the affiliation of Pakistani federations with the ICFTU and the WFTU quickened and solidified political rivalries within the labor movement.

### *Neoclassical Development Strategies*

The fourth major obstacle to workers’ solidarity in Pakistan is an economic counterpart to the U.S. anticommunist military alliance. Under Field Marshal Ayub Khan, economic advisors from the United States were invited to assist Pakistan in engineering rapid industrial growth. (One Planning Commission advisor complained that economic planning in Pakistan had been “insidiously taken over” by these American advisors.)<sup>26</sup> The Pakistani government’s program of rapid industrialization was based on W. Arthur Lewis’s strategy of squeezing maximum profits by paying nonagricultural workers “a subsistence wage plus a margin.”<sup>27</sup> Poor migrants from rural areas were essential to this neo-classical model of (industrial) growth. The key to rapid growth, Pakistani planners and their U.S. advisors argued, was keeping the rural population at subsistence levels while paying workers a near-subsistence wage. The closer the wages could be held to subsistence levels, the faster profits would accumulate and, by assumption, be reinvested in what Lewis referred to as “the capitalist sector.”<sup>28</sup>

In Lewis’s neoclassical model, the state’s duty was to intervene only to maintain this unlimited supply of subsistence waged labor. Land reforms, thus, served no purpose in Lewis’s model of economic growth. As the then chairperson of the Planning Commission, Mahbub ul Haq, declared, “it would be tragic if policies appropriate to a Keynesian era were to be tried in countries still living

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25. Ali 1984, 116.

26. Waterston 1963.

27. Lewis 1954 and Lewis 1955.

28. Ibid.

in a Smithian or Ricardian world.”<sup>29</sup> The state was to assume a pivotal role in repressing workers and their organizations. The ideological, political, and economic interests of the classes that controlled the state prevented workers from exercising their rights. To serve rapid industrial growth, Field Marshal Ayub Khan’s government denied workers such fundamental rights as the freedom of association and of representation. The denial of these rights together with rapid loss of purchasing power, affecting waged labor most, helped to promote the major industrial unrest of the mid 1950s. While India was also the recipient of antilabor, neoclassical U.S. economic ideology, Nehruvian Socialism countered this advice.<sup>30</sup>

### *The Military and Its Elections*

In the early 1960s, Communist and Left activists began mobilizing in communities where workers were becoming militant.<sup>31</sup> By 1967, militant activists were strong in workers’ communities and in factories, and, in 1968, industrial workers took to the street to oppose the government of Field Marshal Ayub Khan and to demand the restoration of democracy. For six months, the military government attempted to suppress the protests, employing the same techniques that colonial rulers had. The government prohibited demonstrations under the colonial-era Defence of Pakistan Rules, arrested the protest leaders, and shot and killed hundreds of protesters. In March 1969, Ayub Khan conceded by promising elections and handing power to his army chief of staff, General Yahya Khan.

The single most important labor law in Pakistan came into effect after Ayub Khan was forced from the presidency. In an attempt to both mollify and depoliticize industrial workers in preparation for a return to civilian government, Ayub Khan’s martial law government consulted with labor leaders and promulgated a new labor law, the above-mentioned Industrial Relations Ordinance. The IRO enabled the Yahya Khan government to depoliticize the labor movement through seemingly democratic means. Deputy Martial Law Administrator Noor Khan, who had earlier organized a tripartite conference to prepare for promulgation of the IRO, borrowed the model that had worked well for him when he managed Pakistan International Airlines, then a military enterprise.<sup>32</sup> The IRO required that trade union leaders be workers, currently employed, and elected by fellow workers. This stipulation ensured that Pakistan’s trade union representatives would be ill equipped to negotiate labor law and labor courts (where English is still used). The IRO also instituted enterprise unionism in Pakistan, permitting trade unionism only at the factory level.

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29. Haq 1963, 1–3.

30. See Rosen 1985, 48 and 62–66.

31. APCOL had controlled the labor movement in the 1950s but was largely irrelevant in the 1960s.

32. Noor Khan, interview, Karachi, 28 and 29 March 1995. The conference Noor Khan organized did not, however, represent shop-floor labor or Left activists, those who helped force the government to address labor demands in the first place.

Ayub Khan's IRO forced radical and reformist labor leaders together as caretakers of a legal framework for the protection of the rights of workers in the formal economy. The IRO required unions to devote their energies to complicated legal requirements for a fraction of the labor force. The labor leaders celebrated the adoption of law that would grant industrial workers their rights to organize, bargain collectively, and strike. The disorganized militant movements of the 1960s could not be sustained under a state-dominated form of trade unionism. The IRO provided rich windfalls for the very labor leadership that had sidelined itself in the 1960s. Unionists who were better equipped to deal with the legal framework gained control over significant categories of workers in the organized industrial sector. But those workers who led the movement lost their command of the labor movement.<sup>33</sup>

In the section that follows, we consider why the pro-worker government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto unleashed violence against workers. We also consider whether military governments are necessarily opposed to workers' organizations.

### **Labor Repression and Bhutto's Pro-Worker Government**

In his first address to the nation as president of Pakistan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto promised to usher in a period of social and economic justice. He enjoined industrialists not to dismiss workers and, in words echoing his "Election Manifesto," referred to workers as "our masters" and the "producers of wealth."<sup>34</sup> Within two weeks of assuming office, Bhutto made good on his election pledge to nationalize most basic industries, assuming the management of thirty-three private businesses through the proclamation of the Economic Reform Ordinance of 1972. In his remarks to a tripartite labor conference in Rawalpindi in November 1973, Bhutto claimed that his "electoral success was made possible because [of] the toiling masses, particularly peasants and labourers [who] co-operated with the Pakistan People's Party. We cannot forget their kindness."<sup>35</sup> At the start, Bhutto did deliver a great deal to regularly employed workers: He promulgated the country's first pension benefit program as well as programs for workplace injury compensation, workers' profit sharing, and workers' participation on management boards. But in 1974, Bhutto vowed that if workers did not end their protests, then "the strength of the street will be met by the strength of the state."<sup>36</sup> Indeed, many of the workers who led the movement of 1968–69 were arrested and shot under Bhutto's government. In June 1972, for example, police shot to death workers at a protest at the Sindh Industrial and Trading Estates.<sup>37</sup> How are we to explain the simultaneous embrace of workers'

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33. I thank Karamat Ali for the points made in this paragraph. Karamat Ali, interviews, Karachi, 26 December 1999 and 31 December 1999.

34. Bhutto 1972, 9–12. Cited in *Ibid.*, 118.

35. *Dawn* 1973.

36. Shaheed 1983, 282.

37. On the police killings, see Shaheed 1983, 283–284.





Pakistani dockworkers unloading metal waste from a freighter. "A government that is openly hostile to workers' rights is hostile to workers' organizations, and this can only undermine the foundations for working class consciousness." (Credit: ILO/Jacques Maillard, 1985)

right to political power and new heights of state violence, as alleged by workers and labor leaders of the day?

The leadership of the Pakistan Peoples' Party, including Bhutto himself, claimed that severe action against industrial workers was required because agents of unnamed foreign governments had allies in the trade union movement who were using industrial unrest to destabilize the country.<sup>38</sup> For their part, trade union leaders claim that Bhutto was never serious about undertaking pro-worker reforms and that he betrayed his feudal origins soon after taking power.<sup>39</sup> An explanation that accommodates both these perspectives returns our attention to the military and the bureaucracy. While Bhutto initially encouraged the growth of organized labor, as figures 1 through 3 suggest, the bureaucracy and police violently repressed it. A story related to me by Gul Rahman, president of the Pakistan Workers' Confederation, support this "treason of the bureaucrats" explanation. In 1973, Rahman met Bhutto, who promised then that he would ensure that workers at the Swat Textile Mill, who were not being paid, would get their back wages within one week. Bhutto conveyed the directive to the NWFP chief minister and to the minister of the interior, who claimed that they were unable to get the owners to pay the workers. "How long is a week!" Bhutto is said to have pleaded. Workers were only paid months later when the Azad Mazdoor Federation, the predecessor to the Muttahida Labour

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38. The position on outside instigators was reaffirmed in an interview with Rahimdad Khan, provincial chief of the Pakistan Peoples Party, Peshawar, 11 August 2006.

39. See Shahid 1983, 280–87 and Ali 2005.

40. Interview with Gul Rahman, president, Pakistan Workers Confederation, Peshawar, 12 August 2006.

Federation, surrounded the management and refused to release them (*gherao*) until they arranged for workers to be paid.<sup>40</sup> The incident suggests that it was not so much Bhutto who turned against Pakistan's workers, but the bureaucracy and the owners of industry who turned against Bhutto.

### **The Military and Workers' Organizations**

Are military governments necessarily opposed to workers' organizations? After all, military personnel are often recruited from the working classes. And bounded solidarity — the kind of solidarity that keeps many unions together — is high among comrades in arms. But militaries in highly unequal societies will regard strong workers' solidarity as threatening to command loyalty and organizational integrity. Unless specifically tasked to create a new order from existing inequalities, militaries typically prefer the existing state of affairs, including a highly unequal economy and the exclusion of civilians from decision-making. Militaries recognize, as Nicolo Machiavelli put it, that

there is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things. For the reformer has enemies in all those who profit by the old order, and only lukewarm defenders in all those who would profit by the new order.<sup>41</sup>

Workers in Pakistan have been steadfast proponents of a “new order of things” — an order that would include an elected government and policies designed for greater economic justice. But Pakistani workers have been fervent in support of their rights: workers' demonstrations and sacrifices in 1968–69, for instance, secured from the military government a promise to restore civil and electoral rights. Workers then helped to elect a president who vowed to attack economic injustice and inequality.

Militaries and military governments are not necessarily opposed to working class organizations. But militaries and military governments that are allied with the United States have been uniformly hostile to workers' movements and organizations. Pakistan's military governments have differed, although they all share a hostility toward workers organizations: Field Marshal Ayub Khan was a secular modernizer who controlled electoral politics, but he permitted a strong civil society; Zia ul Haq was a radical Islamist who poisoned the environment for civil society associations. What these military governments had in common was their alliance with the United States and the suppression of working class organizations. A thorough engagement of the question of why militaries tend to be anti-working class would have to consider more than one country or region. There is not opportunity here to consider even the essential scholarship on military governments. But Ellen Kay Trimberger gives us some immediate assistance. In the four cases of “revolutions from above” (defined as military-bureaucratic pro-working class coups d'état) that she discusses — Meiji's in Japan in

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41. Machiavelli 1903, 49–50.

42. Trimberger 1979. I thank Lois Wasserspring for discussions about military governments and workers' organizations in Latin America.

1868, Ataturk's in Turkey in 1919, Nasser's in Egypt in 1952, and Velasco's in Peru in 1968 — the military took control in reaction to European or U.S. military intervention.<sup>42</sup> Scholarship on the military in Pakistan provides additional insights, including new perspectives on U.S. military training and the diffusion of military-technocratic roles.<sup>43</sup> This scholarship brings our attention back to the conflict between command loyalty and solidarity. Workers' solidarity might permit dissent; command loyalty does not.

Periods of civilian rule in Pakistan are not necessarily less violent toward workers than periods of military rule because the institutions of government do not rematerialize with a change of regimes (i.e., systems for selecting the senior managers of the state). That Bhutto rose to power through an electoral contest rather than military seniority did not automatically transform the institutions (i.e., the patterns of thought and behavior) of the state. As gauged by industrial disputes, one finds no discernable difference in labor militancy across regime type in Pakistan. (See figure 3.) High levels of industrial unrest stretched across two military governments — of very different stripes — and one civilian government. The industrial unrest in the wake of the December 1998 IMF-sponsored structural adjustment program also spread across military “caretaker” governments and elected civilian governments. If there is a correlation between regime type and industrial labor militancy, it is seen in Zia ul Haq's and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's regimes. Each managed to reduce union membership and prohibit industrial disputes. The period of “industrial quiescence” that followed the adoption of the IMF program at the end of 1998 suggests that state institutions are now capable of keeping labor a “passive pedestal” for the ruling classes.<sup>44</sup> To be clear, it is not that the Pakistani ruling classes are more anti-worker or more avaricious than, say, Indian or Bangladeshi ruling classes. It is rather that the Pakistani state prefers that workers be politically disempowered.

The creation of Pakistan was not itself an obstacle to working class identity or to working class organization. Pakistan's ruling classes — the elite of the bureaucracy and the military — have erected most of the major obstacles to workers' organization. The military has thwarted the articulation of workers' interest at local levels in ways that might allow some transference to a national level (i.e., from the workplace to the national assembly); written and promulgated the major repressive labor laws in Pakistan; undermined democratic social institutions and interfered with political parties; banned parties and specific candidates, killed others, and rigged votes; set upon farmers' groups, who, by law, are prohibited from organizing; and murdered human and women's rights activists. The severity of the obstacles, in comparison to India, is clear. While the Indian military has never played a leading role in political decision-making, the military in Pakistan has often organized political actions and has played a decisive role in

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43. Cohen 1984.

44. Marx 1852.

45. Gardezi 1998 discusses the origins of the weakness of social sciences in Pakistan. Also see Zaidi 2002.

most political decisions, even during those few periods when elected, civilian governments were in the legislature.

## Conclusion

A complete exploration of the inability of working class solidarity to achieve political influence in Pakistan would require consideration of the history of left political parties in Pakistan and their fatal encounters with military governments. The exploration would have to consider how colonial-styled government education policy led to the suffocation of critical social sciences;<sup>45</sup> and it would have to examine as well the agenda of “elite classes” in Pakistan, including the upper echelons of the military, the bureaucracy, and industry, as well as the construction and penetration into Pakistani society of the “ideology of Pakistan” — the conviction that Muslims living in Muslim-majority areas of British India constitute “a nation” to be represented by an “Islamic state.” The various forces undermining opportunities for workers’ solidarity in Pakistan — the displacements due to Partition, colonial institutions of government, new anticommunist alliances, and neoclassical economic ideologies — might appear to be an assortment of independent variables. But, as I have argued, they all proceed from a single source: a centralizing and repressive ruling class preoccupied with “national security” — in practice, its own preservation.

Explaining why something did *not* happen — why workers have failed to achieve the kind of political influence that they have been able to achieve in other South Asian countries — is likely to be less convincing than explaining why something *did* happen. Fortunately for our analysis we have an episode — from 1972 until 1974 — when the unusual happened. A proponent of the rights of the working classes became prime minister. In 1971, when the morale of the Pakistani military was so low (as a result of its failure to keep Pakistan united), it withdrew in disgrace from politics. Bhutto was then made the chief martial law administrator. This was the only time in all Pakistan’s history that the military was not in official or de facto control of the state.<sup>46</sup> This was also the one time when workers’ organizations grew in numbers and in confidence, and won significant government concessions, including more secure employment, better wages, sharing of profits, pensions, injury and death compensation, and participation in management decisions.

Economic development strategies, state ideologies, and ruling classes in Pakistan have been openly hostile to workers and their rights. A government that is openly hostile to workers’ rights is hostile to workers’ organizations, and this can only undermine the foundations for working class consciousness. These

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46. Estimates of the periods over which the military controlled the government in Pakistan vary. Mohammad Waseem figures that the military controlled the government except for seven years, from 1973 to 1977 and from 1997 to 1999. See Waseem 2002 on elected governments’ subordinate role to the military through Pakistan’s history.

observations may seem simplistic, but they direct our analysis to the core obstacle to working class organizations: government. Pakistani governments, as we have shown, have undermined working class organizations.

Another lesson proceeds directly from the first. Class analysis requires a global perspective. Workers' organizations in Pakistan cannot be analyzed as if they operate within a single economy or polity. Workers' organizations would be stronger if Pakistan were not a front-line state in Washington's battle against its "enemies" in the region. The ruling classes could have tolerated a more social welfare-oriented policy, had U.S. foreign policy not been deeply suspicious of left labor organizers and strengthened undemocratic forces to undermine workers' solidarity.

The accomplishments of Pakistan's Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (1980–1988) and the Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy (1999–present) were largely due to working class backing. Despite repression, unions have been, since the founding of Pakistan, the major social force for democracy and for civilian rule. There is no reason to think that industrial workers and their unions will not continue to be the leading force for the restoration of democracy and civilian rule. Regrettably we also have no cause to think that the military will not continue to regard workers' movements and workers' organizations as threatening to "national security" (i.e., the military's security) and to restrict and repress workers' organizations.

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