

"Agents and Articulators of Change" Student Politics and the State in West Pakistan 1940s - 1971

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In January 1953 the port city of Karachi in the newly founded state of Pakistan saw its student population come out on the streets with a list of demands relating to improvements in the educational system and facilities. The city of Karachi, which became the first federal capital, had seen major demographic changes after partition, and was facing the socio-economic and infrastructural challenges that came with it. Amongst these was the issue of higher education in a city characterised by growing professional classes, made up overwhelmingly of the newly migrated Urdu-speaking population.

In 1949, students of the DOW Medical College founded the Democratic Students' Federation (DSF)¹, a left-leaning organisation, which within the next year swept most of the college union elections in Karachi and initiated the Inter-Collegiate Body (ICB) to unify the student unions under one banner. The ICB consisted of the vice presidents and general secretaries of all the students' unions, a few of which were in the hands of other student organisations, such as the Islami Jama'at-e-Tuleba (henceforth Jama'at), a student organisation of the right-wing Jama'at-e-Islami (JI). The DSF initially concentrated on student matters but soon began taking on larger issues of social and political relevance in Karachi, Pakistan, the region and even the world. On 8th January 1953, a demonstration was organised by the DSF dominated ICB and thousands of students took to the streets, putting forward a charter of demands regarding the education system and infrastructure. The demonstration turned violent with seven students being killed in police firing. The news spread quickly and processions were taken out by students across Pakistan, with solidarity protests taking place in the major cities of West and East Pakistan throughout the year 1953.

In the protracted struggle with the state – what came to be termed as the '8th of January' movement – students with affiliations and political memberships across the ideological board contributed to a public contestation of questions central to defining citizenship, democratic practice and cultural visions for the nation. Thus, the debates this movement sparked did not remain limited to the practical demands related to the education system, but spilled into – and in many ways reflected – the realm of broader questions engaging with citizenship rights, democracy and national culture in a state that was in the process of

¹ The DSF was founded in Rawalpindi in 1948 in the Gordon College and extended to Karachi in 1949. Abid Hassan Minto, today Supreme Court Advocate, was one of the founding members.

establishing a coherent national narrative. The 1953 student movement is one of the numerous examples which can serve as a window into the history of contestation in Pakistan.

My PhD project at the South Asia Studies Department of the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin looks at three case studies of student movements in the early post-1947 decades². In examining students as "agents and articulators of change"³, the study asks: what can student politics tell us about the politics of and discourse on developing and shaping a national culture and Pakistani citizenship? Furthermore, the study of the state's reactions and handling of such moments of 'crisis' and contestation, make its strategies and discourses on public, political and national space, and broadly speaking, processes of post-colonial state-formation visible.

This study approaches the student movements as moments of crisis and contestation, understanding them as not only as something to be explained but rather primarily as creative moments. (See Naveeda Khan 2010) Such a lens highlights how the lack of clarity at independence about what shape Pakistan would take – ideologically, territorially as well as in terms of state sovereignty – allowed for a space for debate and contestation, which can be seen as a sign of a lively public political field rather than of ideological uncertainty. (Toor 2011) These 'confusions' in the national vision – as evident from the multiplicity of imaginings of Muslim political identity in the elite sphere pre- and post-1947 – provided an initial space for discussions on the nation-state project which were actively contributed to and shaped by progressive intellectuals as well as the religious right and regionally rooted ethnic discourses. Thus, my project wants to not only understand why these particular moments (1953, 1961, 1967-68) of crisis came about but, first and foremost, enquires into how these crises were lived, interpreted, overcome, forgotten, re-imagined, especially in the everyday context of state and society. The discursive evaluations of these crises are seen as carrying ontological weight and are treated as a "serious statement on life in Pakistan." (Khan 2010: Endnote 1)

To take the case of the 1953 events, such a lens reveals, for example, the central role of the leftist student organisation DSF in the early political and ideological contestations in the public sphere. It uncovers the engagement of the Islami Jami'at-e Tuleba with the Left – a story that does not fit in easily with the mainstream nationalist narrative. As Humeira Iqtidar has argued in her book *Secularizing Islamists?* (2011), the religious right (in this case the Jami'at), through its interaction and conflict with leftists, actually evolved politically in terms of ideology and strategy. The Jami'at was initially conceived of as a da'wah (missionary) movement. As a student wing of the Jama'at-i Islami it was meant

² 1953 in Karachi & Hyderabad, 1961 in Karachi & Lahore, in 1967-68 country-wide (focus on Karachi and Lahore). It is important to emphasise here that the inquiry focuses on case studies of student organisations and movements in West Pakistan and does not claim to cover East Pakistan, although East Pakistani students naturally do feature in the politics, narratives and discourses in West Pakistan.

³ I have borrowed this phrase from Humeira Iqtidar, *Secularizing Islamists?* 2011, p. 67.

as an organisation to shape the education of Pakistan's future leadership. It worked towards the implementation of its founding ideologue Mawdudi's concept of a step-by-step guided revolution from above. In 1950, the Jami'at launched its first journal, *Azm* (Determination) in Urdu which was soon followed by an English-language magazine, *Students' Voice*. The magazine and its direct textual conversation with the DSF student magazine *Student Herald* reflects the oppositional importance of the left for the Jami'at. (See Fig. 1) Soon being more involved in campus politics became necessary for the Jami'at members to keep the Leftist student organisations in check. (See Nasr 1992)



Fig 1: The Islami Jami'at-e-Tuleba's publication *Students' Voice* (4th March 1953) accuses the *Student Herald* of being a communist mouth-piece and hijacking the ICB.

To give another example of the study's empirical focus, it looks at the student activism of the early 1960s led by the National Students Federation (NSF) in Karachi and Lahore, when the student population emerged as the main political opposition to the military government of Ayub Khan and organised mass demonstrations openly defying the martial law orders throughout this period. (See Fig. 2) Through the examination of everyday concerns and grievances, lived citizenship, political strategies, protest and dissent, the study aims to weave a narrative of the negotiation and contestation of national culture and citizenship in the public sphere but also of how the state, that is, the government, engaged with these issues.

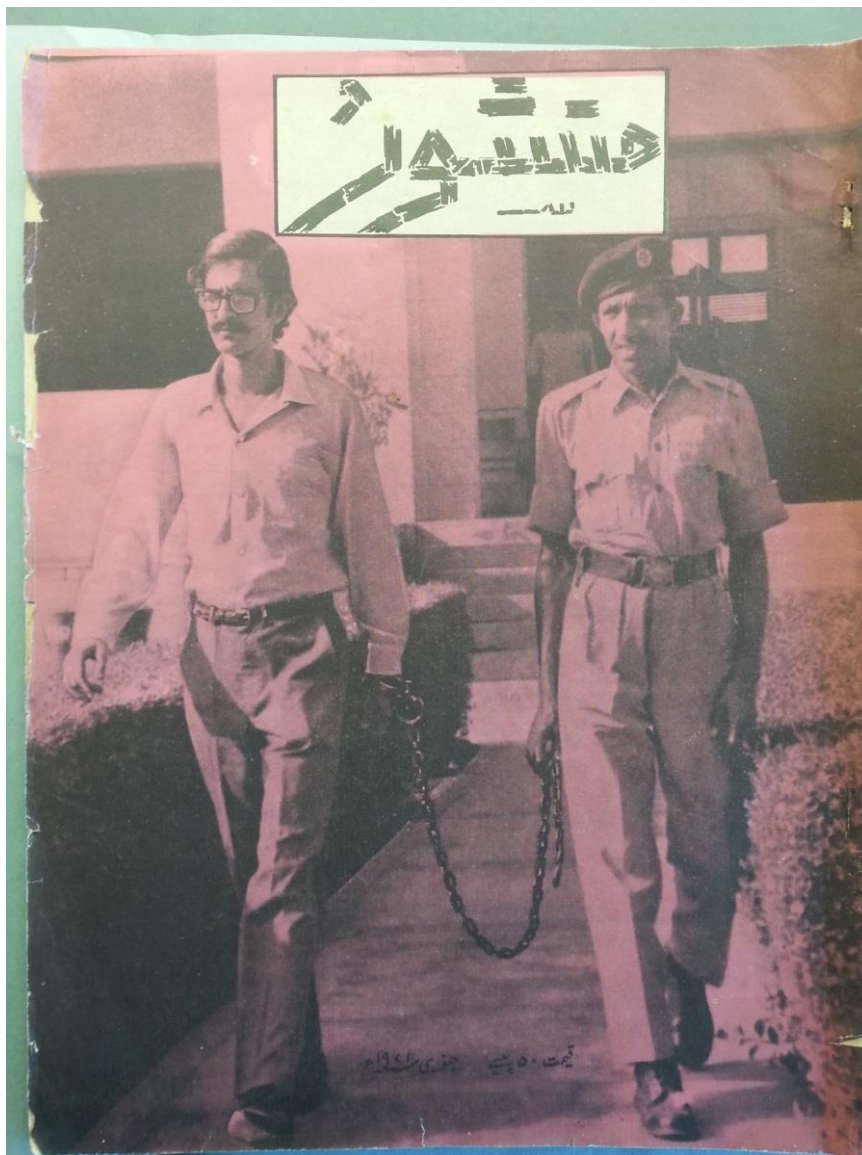


Fig. 2: The cover of the labour magazine *Manshoor* (Jan 1971) – A picture leader of the leftist National Students Federation in the early 1960s, Rashid Hassan, under arrest.⁴

⁴ International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, Progressive Movements in Pakistan Collection (P.M.P.), File 283.

While the public debates and articulations in the student milieu were very much centred within the national space, they were also, especially in the 1960s, expressed on a transnational level, with students voicing solidarity on issues beyond Pakistan's national borders. For example, students on the left took up issues such as that of Nasser of Egypt nationalising the Suez Canal in 1954 or the political murder of Lumumba in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1961. Similarly, transnational solidarities were also produced among the religious right. (Nelson 2011) There was a shift in ideas about Islam and nationalism expressed by student groups in Pakistan from visions that were bound by national boundaries to ones that rejected the notion of compatibility between Islam and territorial Pakistani nationalism. The conflict ridden interaction between and amongst the various leftist, regional and religious student groups that culminated by the 1960s in a violent stalemate "produced a certain disenchantment with exclusionary efforts to control the 'state-based Muslim nationalism'." (Nelson 2011: 565) In their quest for power, student unions in Pakistan produced alternative ideas about Islam and Muslim solidarity that were transnational and "counter-nationalist" in nature. (Ibid.: 570)

Along with the focus on drawing out the practices and discourses, which is based on primary sources in Urdu and English such as personal interviews, newspapers, student publications, university reports, biographies, the project also looks at state sources such as official documents of the government of Pakistan (Education Commission reports, police reports, court inquiries and so on). One of the themes that emerges from such state sources is the state's explicit executive and legislative engagement with youth, education and specifically political dissent from students of higher education. The youth, in particular the student, is constructed by the state as the 'torch bearer' of the nation's future, while at the same time being a perpetual thorn in its side through its dissident activities. (See Lutfi n.d.)

When it comes to nation-building, the youth of any country are cited as the hope for the future. As the Advisory Board of Education formulated it in 1948: "The educational system of Pakistan should [...] inspire the student with a firm faith in the destiny of Pakistan as the torch-bearer of the Islamic conception of one world based in tolerance, justice and equality." (Govt. of Pakistan 1948: 20) Within the youth, the student population in higher education forms a privileged section – especially in developing countries – that benefits from state policies to drive forward the development of the nation. It is particularly through the 'educated citizen' that development and progress can be brought about: We saw this especially prominently, for example, during Ayub Khan's 'decade of development' in the 1960s. At the same time, the students' privileged status as 'torch bearers' was contradicted by their regime-critical activism expressed in their engagement with issues such as democracy, civil rights, social justice and the role of Islam in the state. The state struggled to suppress dissenting political movements and actions spear-headed or participated in by students. (See Fig. 3)

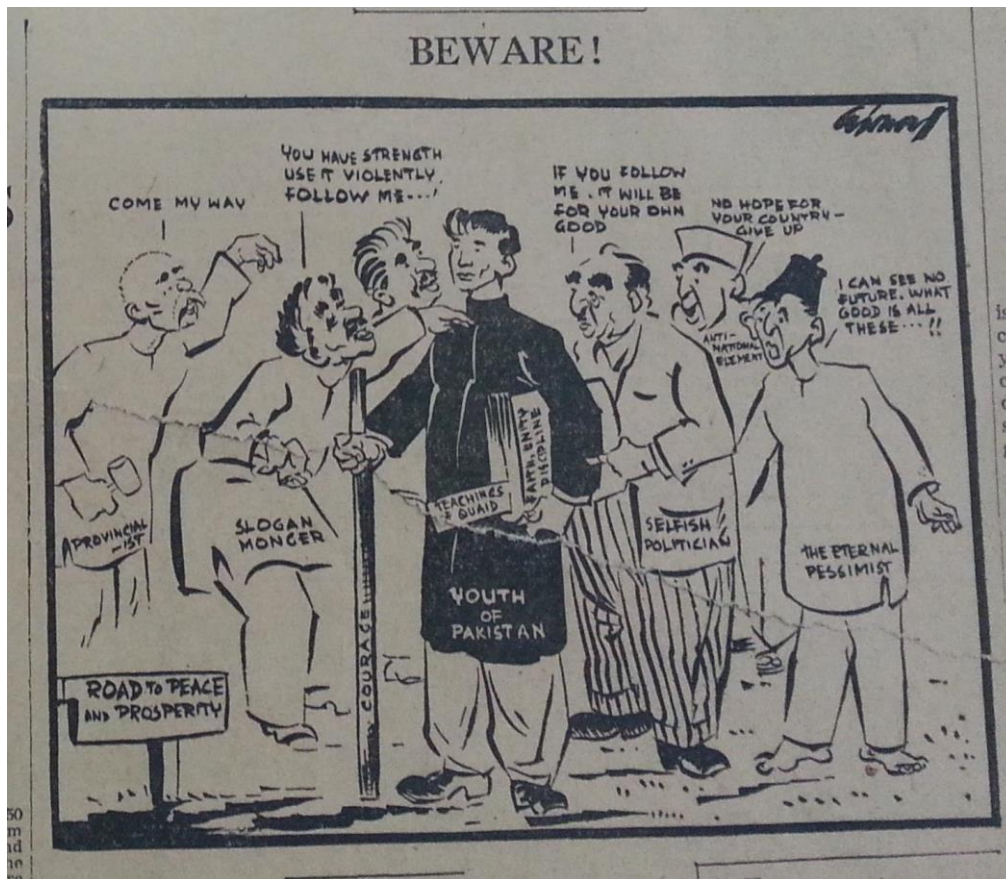


Fig. 3: A cartoon in the English daily "Dawn" (11th Jan 1953) – An example of the representation of the student agitation as being a result of 'misguided and exploited youth'.

The questions that are being asked in this project are embedded in cultural history and anthropology, fields that are only recently emerging from the margins of Pakistani Studies. These questions have to do with the practice and discourse of citizenship, the everyday experience of the state, and the diversity and contestations of visions for the society and national culture. Following Naveeda Khan's (2010) framework of going "beyond crisis", the study takes these moments of crisis and tension – as represented by the case studies – as the starting points of inquiry, and not as moments of failure (failure of state, sovereignty or nationalism) that needs to be explicated. It thus contributes to the new and still small corpus of work on Pakistan⁵ that breaks with the dominant historiographical trend which can be termed as constituting a 'crisis discourse'.

⁵ For an overview, see Bajwa 2012.

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Sadia Bajwa, M.A. forscht zu Geschichts- und Identitätsdiskursen im modernen Südasien vom 19. Jahrhundert bis in die Gegenwart. Dabei liegt ihr kulturgeschichtlicher Schwerpunkt besonders auf den politisch-kulturellen Diskursen und Praktiken im postkolonialen Nationalstaat Pakistan. Sie absolvierte ihr Magisterstudium in Geschichts- und Politikwissenschaften Südasiens an der Universität Heidelberg in 2009. Seit 2010 ist sie Wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiterin am Seminar für Südasiens-Studien der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Derzeit promoviert sie über "The Negotiation of National Culture and Citizenship: Student Politics and the State in West Pakistan 1940s-1971".