The Pakistan Peoples Party: Snare for workers and peasants

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After nearly 15 years of Zia?s dictatorship, the Pakistani People?s Party, under Benazir Zardari (née Bhutto) is raising its political profile. Andy Bannister looks at Pakistan?s recent past and what lies in store for workers in the future.

General Zia Ul Haq of Pakistan is one of US and British imperialism?s most trusted allies. His military Bonapartist regime plays host to three million Afghan refugees. He funnel@ western aid and arms to the Afghan rebels and, in return gets plenty of aid and investment from the imperialists.

They are happy to ignore Zia?s rotten ?human rights? record. They brush aside the fact that he came to power through a military coup in 1977. Where fat profits and the possibility of striking a military blow at the USSR by proxy are concerned the western imperialists soon forget their democratic scruples.

All is not rosy in Zia?s garden, however. The impending deal on Afghanistan will cut off funds to the regime. The scourge of unemployment throughout the Gulf and the west is strangling Pakistan?s major source of foreign currency money sent home by Pakistani workers abroad. And the looming threat of world recession is a constant reminder to Pakistan of its fragile economy. A series of good harvests of cotton and rice together with high prices for both commodities on the world market have helped Pakistan?s economy remain buoyant for the last three years. But as the collapse of Bolivia?s tin industry revealed, an economy based on one, or even two, primary products can be devastated by price fluctuation on the world market.

Drain

In no sense is Pakistan?s economy in a state to weather the coming storm. It is saddled with a major debt burden of $11 billion. This is a drain, to the tune of 22%, on all of its export earnings. On top of this the government is teetering on the verge of bankruptcy. Last year despite an overall growth in its GDP, Pakistan had a budget deficit of $2.27 billion. The World Bank is currently tying all aid to Pakistan to an austerity package, which will mean massive attacks on the working class. There is every reason to believe that the workers will struggle against these attacks.

On the political front too, the regime faces problems. It has alienated large sections of the western orientated middle class through its policies of Islamisation. According to one of Zia?s ideologues:

?In the modern state of Pakistan the will of Allah will be sovereign, and all decisions will have to be subjected to the divine revelation.?

In practice this means that Zia enforces all the barbaric and reactionary rules laid down in the Koran.
The alienation of the middle classes could well make itself felt in the elections scheduled for 1990. The elections are designed to prettify the dictatorship. If they go ahead, however, they could ignite a major crisis. Opposing Zia’s Mulsim League in these elections is the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD) The MRD is a coalition of parties, the most significant of which is the Pakistani People’s Party (PPP) whose leader Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto was overthrown by Zia in 1977 and executed by him in 1979. The PPP commands widespread support amongst the Pakistani masses. Its mobilisation two years ago held to greet its leader, and Bhutto’s daughter back from exile revealed this. Since then, however, it has been kept very much backstage by Benazir Zardari (née Bhutto).

Despite the Bhutto dynasty turning the PPP into its mere appendage the years of Zia’s dictatorship have instilled illusions amongst the masses, in the PPP’s ability to lead a democratic and even socialist transformation in Pakistan. The fight to dispel these illusions is central to a revolutionary strategy in Pakistan. It is all the more vital given that a supposedly ?Marxist? wing inside the PPP gives credence to Benazir’s demagogic claims to be a socialist.

The Pakistani workers and poor peasants need to be reminded of the PPP’s role in government from 1971 to 1977.

Ali Bhutto came to power after a series of violent mass uprisings in 1968 69 overthrew the military regime of General Ayub. The bourgeoisie m Pakistan demobilised the rising with the promise of elections. These were held in December 1970 and the PPP won them hands down. It did so because despite only being formed in 1967 it identified with the risings and outflanked the previously influential Combined Opposition Parties.

This victory was greeted by the postponement of the convocation of the New Assembly by the military authorities. This ignited a further wave of protests in East Pakistan and directly led to civil war and the eventual creation of Bangladesh. The defeat of Pakistan’s army by Bengali guerrillas completely undermined the senile military dictatorship. Bhutto who had won 75% of the seats in the West and who had supported the suppression of the Bengali rising was handed power on 20 December 1971.

Illusions

For many workers and peasants the PPP government seemed a just reward for their sacrifices in the struggle against Ayub. When Bhutto immediately confiscated the passports of Pakistan’s top 22 capitalist families the masses’ illusions in him were further strengthened. However, Bhutto was no socialist. He described his economic programme as a ?happy blend of public and private sectors.? He declared.

The economy we envisage is a ?mixed? one, in which private enterprise is neither crippled nor allowed to appropriate the nation’s wealth for the benefit of the few?

This mixed economy was brought about through a rapid nationalisation programme.

Thirty one large firms in ten basic industries were nationalised including iron and steel, basic metals, heavy engineering, cars and tractors, chemicals, cement and public utilities. This process consisted of the government appointing managers and establishing workers’ committees to help them run the firms. However, neither the managers, nor the workers’ committees had ?financial control? of any of the nationalised firms. This remained with the big capitalists who, within a year had had their passports returned.

Moreover, the industries nationalised in the heavy industrial sector accounted for only 12.8%of the GDP and employed only 3.4% of the labour force by 1974. In addition, Pakistan’s cotton and textile industry the
country’s biggest industry was left in private hands. Imperialism was also kept happy with the promise that no firms in which there were foreign holdings would be touched by nationalisation.

The ‘happy blend’ made the bosses a lot happier. At the same time the left of the PPP was claiming success for its ‘socialist’ programme of nationalisations. But this co-existence soon ended as the economy fountered and the bosses turned against Bhutto.

Bhutto’s land reform was, likewise, tailored to pacify the landowners. Thus, despite the reforms of 1972 90% of all farms occupying 59% of all cultivatable land are smaller than ten hectares. The big landowners retained their lucrative control over cotton and rice growing.

The result of the reforms was disaster for workers and peasants. Foreign reserves fell, prices and unemployment rose and jute exports (the main source of income for the small peasant) slumped. With the Karachi stock exchange plummeting and the cost of the war against Bangladesh beginning to register, the economy began to spiral towards the position where the foreign debt totalled $9,164.8 million (50% of GNP) and the local bourgeoisie tried to survive on the profits of cheap exported labour.

These policies of conciliation and pandering to the bourgeoisie were not for one minute reflected in the PPP’s attitude towards workers who chose to fight its betrayals. In June 1972 (supposedly when the left was in its ascendancy in the party) an unspecified number of workers were shot at the Pea ox Sultan textile mills where a strike had been staged against the government.

In October machine tool workers in the Landhi Korangi industrial belt came out on strike in the government owned industry. The PPP responded by declaring the strike illegal and arresting its leaders. Other workers came out for two days. Two mills nearby were then occupied. On 18 October 1972 police and paramilitary units attacked the mills and killed four workers injuring hundreds. The entire industrial estate was paralysed by the angry strike that followed. On 22 October the police launched another offensive and killed two more workers. The hill on which they died became known as Red Hill. The strike remained solid for several weeks before being betrayed by the trade union leaders.

Following this strike wave Bhutto began to consolidate his personal control of the PPP and establish himself as a semi dictator. The left were expelled from the cabinet. The army was bolstered. Half of the national budget was allocated for defence against the workers in Karachi and Labors where martial law was the norm. The media was used to boost Bhutto into a cult figure. The ‘Defends of Pakistan? Ordnance and the ‘Suppression of Terrorist Activities? Act both served to undermine the vestiges of Bourgeois democracy in the country. Despite all of these measures General Zia ul Haq was able to oust Bhutto on 5 July 1977 not with standing the PPP’s victory in the elections (extensively rigged) held earlier that year. The truth was that Bhutto’s government had alienated all sections of its social base. The world economic crisis of the mid 1970s prevented Bhutto’s mixed economy from generating sufficient profits to satisfy the bourgeoisie or the middle classes. The peasantry were still forced to eke out a living on tiny plots of land. The workers had borne the brunt of the PPP’s repression. Thus, when the coup came Bhutto had little to offer in the way of resistance.

Following Bhutto’s execution in 1979, Zia has consolidated a vicious Islamic dictatorship. In this context the PPP’s popularity, under Benazir, has to some extent revived. Her strategy is to woo Zia. Despite a formal position of boycotting Zia’s elections she ordered participation by the PPP in the November 1987 local elections. Along with the MRD she is pinning her hopes on victory in the planned 1990 elections. To this end she is busy eradicating the PPP’s remaining claims to radicalism. India Today observed:

“In tune with a world wide shift in political opinions, Benazir has moved her party to the centre? (15.1.88).
Her programme repeats all of the treacherous phrases that her father used to deploy. She describes herself as a socialist and argues:

"A mixed economy informed with an egalitarian spirit is the inevitable need. That is all." (Pakistan: The Gathering Stone)

In practice this means attacks on the workers and peasants at the behest of those who benefit most from economic "mixing" the capitalist class. No Pakistani workers should be deceived into thinking the PPP is "their party". It is a party of the state capitalist leaning wing of the Pakistani bourgeoisie. Its "left wing", has no organic links with the Pakistani working class. Nor do the mass of poor peasants have anything to gain from allegiance to the PPP. The party proved, in practice, its unwillingness to break with the powerful Pakistani landowners.

**Popular front**

The PPP represents an attempt by the state capitalist wing of the bourgeoisie to tie the workers and small peasants to a popular front party, and a popular front government. This is the purpose of its socialist demagogy. Its repeatedly declared adherence to Islam, on the other hand, reassures the Muslim influenced peasants and traders.

And its insistent commitment to the "mixed" economy is its calling card with the Pakistani ruling class.

Increasingly the PPP has become the private fiefdom of Benazir. Tensions are opening up. For the Pakistani messes the key task in preparation for the potential clashes around the elections is to break from the PPP altogether. Only the road of working class independence can lead to the liberation of the Pakistani masses. Along this road we can lay the basis for the building of a true party of the workers and peasants with a programme of action linking the immediate demands of the oppressed to the struggle for permanent revolution, in Pakistan and a socialist federation of South Asia.

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