

# Pakistan: Utopian or revolutionary alternatives?

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In May of this year, Pakistan agreed its 13th "structural adjustment" deal with the IMF. Like all such programmes around the world, this deal demands a raft of neo-liberal measures such as a free floating exchange rate, privatisation of state assets, reductions in state subsidies and increased indirect taxation in exchange for an IMF loan. In response, three leaders of the Awami Workers Party, the largest and most influential organisation on the Pakistani left, Ammar Rashid, M. Nawfal Saleemi and Assim Sajjad Akhtar, have published a "position paper" in which, as well as a critique of the deal, they outline their alternative. The full paper can be found at <https://awamiworkersparty.org/economy-of-debt-position-paper/> <sup>[1]</sup>

Revolutionaries and socialists should welcome the authors' call for a discussion on the state of the Pakistani economy, the IMF and what they call a "progressive approach to the Pakistani economy?". It is high time the left discussed these issues and the tactical, strategic and programmatic tasks arising from such an analysis.

## Reformism

Clearly, a number of the criticisms, historical accounts and figures presented in the document are interesting and include valuable information. However, the paper also reflects the reformist strategy of the AWP. Throughout the paper, the authors make suggestions for how the bourgeois state (Pakistan) could improve its economy. They do not even once mention the idea and possibility of workers taking power. The authors appear to have a strange faith in the bourgeois state. Whilst they criticise the current "rentier state" for its failure to oversee, "the pursuit of the protection of the working population's rights and interests" (page 10), they suggest that this state could be transformed into one "where economic development and social welfare take precedence" (page 30).

Their criticisms are rooted in an unhealthy, utopian trust in the bourgeois state and their proposals are aimed at moulding the Pakistan state into a democratic welfare state, which would still be bourgeois. A romanticisation of the European welfare state model can also be felt throughout the paper alongside a gross neglect of the fact that the specific historical material conditions that led to the Keynesian social democracy model do not exist today. The proposals that the authors make are not meant to be transitional demands that pave the way for workers to take power.

The paper suggests that all the provinces are rich in resources and therefore Pakistan could build its economy by making these resources the "basis of a sustainable and substantial domestic manufacturing base" (page 11). The importance of fighting for workers' democratic control over these resources is completely lost upon them. Even when workers' control is mentioned in Section 5.2 (with regards to firm management and profit allocation in the production process), it reads as if the bourgeois state is going to realise by reading the paper how essential all of this is and will suddenly agree to serve these rights to workers on a platter.

In short, the tone of the authors suggests a sort of utopianism as well as passivity ? they do not see themselves as active agents of change and therefore make suggestions for the bourgeois state to amend itself since the state is the only agent of action they have in sight. And that is a reflection of the Awami Workers Party's reformist approach to politics.

### Cutting some slack to imperialism

While explaining the problems that plague Pakistan's economy, the authors take an approach that places the main responsibility for the suffering of the poor on the elites of the semi-colonial country. According to them, the main responsibility lies with Pakistan and these problems are then exacerbated by the conditionalities of the IMF.

This reflects a sheer lack of attention to the role that imperialism plays in Pakistan's decision-making. Without a doubt, it is the Pakistani civilian and military bourgeoisie that take decisions that impact terribly on the lives of the common people. However, what the authors fail to recognise is that these local ruling classes also constitute a part of the imperialist order, albeit a subordinate one. For example, Section 5.1 details how Pakistan has been renting out its resources and services to big economic powers such as the US and Saudi Arabia. Yet the critique remains simply internally-focused.

The tone of the paper suggests that the agent of action is the Pakistan alone, while the US and Saudi Arabia are simply passive recipients of the services that Pakistan provides, as if they had no role in creating the objective conditions that leave fewer options for semi-colonial states to get their share of the pie in the imperialist world order.

The section on the energy crisis shows how it was the World Bank that forced Pakistan into privatising the electricity utility, resulting in the state paying \$21 million more than it would for a public sector plant. The impact was borne by the common people, who paid exorbitant electricity bills and continue to do so today as well as the working class, since industrial output was adversely affected by frequent power cuts. Yet the authors fail to draw the conclusion that imperialism has a role to play in the suffering of the common people in semi-colonial states like Pakistan.

### Stages theory

The last paragraphs of Section 5.1 blame the military for stunting development by setting up its own businesses and leaving no room for ?free market principles of competition? because the military has ?preferential access to state resources and decision-making?. One wonders whether the Awami Workers Party is taking sides in the inner contradictions of the ruling class and trying to be an advocate for the civilian bourgeoisie.

Such suggestions are rooted in the stages theory, which practically appears to be quite popular amongst the Pakistani Left. It is assumed that socialism can only be achieved in stages, in which there must first be full-scale industrialisation and bourgeois democracy which will, somehow, pave the way for a workers' revolt. Proponents of this theory believe that, here and now, they must side with the civilian bourgeoisie to strengthen democracy. This theory also helps justify their lack of interest in engaging with the working class and playing a role in helping raise its level of class consciousness.

Now, it is true that military rule is especially detrimental to the working class in the political sphere because of attacks on democratic rights. However, that is not the cause of concern in the final paragraphs of Section 5.1. These simply relate to the economy, making the authors sound like proponents of the free market, who are completely ignorant of the fact that, whether it is military or civilian capitalists, the lives of

the working class remain the same in the economic sphere.

## Internationalism

Proposals for policies for the Pakistani state to adopt, such as creating a strong productive base to build the economy, suggest a nationalist sentiment, in which the whole concern of the authors is building the national economy without any regard for the international working class. The idea of building an internationalist consciousness in the working class seems to be of little interest to the Awami Workers Party. Every nationalist sentiment is a turn away from internationalism, and this can also be observed in the lack of engagement by the party's UK chapter with, for instance, the British working class and the different migrant communities living in Britain.

## Utopian delusions

According to the paper, 'state led mining and processing can, if the requisite political will exists, ensure workers' safety, rights, and adequate compensation as well as ecological sustainability' (page 14). This is completely utopian and delusional, but at the same time typical of reformist ideology. It reduces workers' safety and rights, as well as environmental sustainability, to questions of 'political will' instead of locating the problems in the rotten capitalist system and the interests of the ruling class.

Furthermore, the statement seems to be content with simply 'adequate compensation' for workers and does not link it up with the possibility for workers to seize the means of production under workers' control. It, again, places this utopian faith in the bourgeois state as if, after reading this paper, the state will come to a sudden realisation that all it was doing was wrong and will agree to serve the workers their rights on a platter. This delusional approach is extremely dangerous. The only way workers can and will get their rights is when they rise against the capitalist class, force concessions from them and their state and eventually expropriate the owners of the means of production.

And that cannot happen spontaneously. It is primarily the task of revolutionaries to build a working class party and raise the level of class consciousness that, to quote Lenin, cannot come from within and has to come from without.

Similarly, Section 5.4 ends on abstract demands on the state, one of which is to 'decentralise urban planning out of the hands of unaccountable civil-military bureaucrats, real estate barons and political elites'. A simple question comes to mind after reading these demands: why would the bourgeois state grant these demands? Just because they have been stated in a party position paper?

A similar delusion can be seen in the section on agriculture, in which the authors state that Pakistan needs to formulate a new agricultural policy that redistributes arable land to millions of landless rural families. Again, why would the landed elite sitting in the assemblies pass such legislation? The section on labour productivity and well-being also makes suggestions to the state to uplift the skills and education of the workforce as well as the conditions of the workplace. The section on demands remains abstract as it does not provide answers on how to achieve them.

The section makes it appear to be a question of will on the part of the political elite, ignoring the clash of the class background and interests of this elite with such demands. Similarly, the section on women states what the bourgeois state needs to do with regards to the oppression of women but fails to pave the way to the materialisation of such demands. The section on the 'short-term measures' demands that the state should support the population in these difficult times and impose direct taxes on wealth, assets and higher incomes. As stated above, none of the demands that benefit the many and not the few, or disrupt the

capitalist patriarchal order, are going to be granted without waging a struggle for their materialisation.

Nonetheless, the suggestion to make the banking sector's principal function one that is 'developmental' has to be the most ridiculous 'and also leaves out the question who is to benefit from this 'development'.

## Conclusions

In short, whilst many of the critical observations made in the AWP paper point to real problems and issues, the conclusions proposed are mostly delusional, reformist and utopian. The underlying assumption throughout the paper is that the existing Pakistani state can be transformed into an instrument that serves the people and not 'just' the ruling elite and imperialist powers. The paper appears to be aimed at showing the state that this is the proposed 'progressive' path.

To put such faith and trust in the Pakistani state reveals a failure to recognise the bourgeois nature of that state. The authors, in true reformist spirit, have made proposals to amend this bourgeois state from within. They do not even allude to the idea of workers waging a struggle to win these rights and eventually taking power. The questions of mobilising the party cadres for the pursuit of these democratic rights and elevating the level of consciousness of the class simply do not occur to them (at least the paper makes it appear so), which is why they do not propose a programme of action for workers taking power.

Thus, the short-term and medium-to-long-term measures all speak of actions that the state can take. For example, it could make 'legal reforms to ensure that the fundamental basis of mineral, water and other natural extraction and other natural resources must be their use value to local communities and the wider working public'. The paper grants all the agency to the state (which, mind you, is still bourgeois in its nature) and does not consider the possibility of the urban and rural poor and the working class having the agency to enforce such democratic reforms.

All this time and energy has been spent on penning a paper for a bourgeois state that is anyways not going to pay any heed to what the Left has to say. What would have been more useful would have been for the AWP to invest such resources in developing a programme of action for the working class that paves the path for the workers to take control in the immediate sense of democratic demands and finally take power by overthrowing the bourgeoisie.

We should have nothing against making democratic or social demands on the bourgeois state, but such demands should be formulated bearing in mind the bourgeois nature of the state and that the Left would have to mobilise to fight for them. By contrast, the paper has throughout assumed the state to be a neutral institution that can be moulded into one that cares for all of its population and would suddenly realise after reading the paper that it needs to grant the masses their rights.

Leftists need to do away with such reformist delusions about the nature and class character of the state. Rather, we need to focus our energies on building a truly democratic-centralist revolutionary party that mobilises its cadres to fight for democratic rights within bourgeois democracies and thereby prepare the class to fight the ultimate war against the ruling classes to seize the means of production.

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**Source URL:** <https://fifthinternational.org/content/pakistan-utopian-or-revolutionary-alternatives>

## Links:

[1] <https://awamiworkersparty.org/economy-of-debt-position-paper/>