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## The Prominent Leftist Leaders of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: An Appraisal



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**Abstract:** *The history of leftist politics in NWFP (present-day Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) draws significantly less attention in scholarly and academic journals on national and international politics than other topics do. This was because of Pakistan's alliance with the US-led capitalist camp right after independence in 1947, which made it difficult for its leftist leaders to carry out their program. Throughout the Cold War era (1945-93) the leftist political parties in Pakistan in general and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in particular were incapable of consolidating their position in the post-colonial period and consequently remained marginalized in electoral politics. Despite severe state repression and cracks down, many of the notable leftist leaders of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa continued to carry out their work. However, the list of these leaders is very long and could not be covered by a single research paper. Therefore, this study aims at highlighting the family background, biographies, and political achievements of only selected Six leftist leaders of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.*

**Key Words:** Leftist, Marxist, Nationalist, Pakhtun, Progressive, Revolutionary

### Introduction

Before, exploring the early life, biography, and contribution of selected leftist leaders of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan, it is necessary to explain the term "left", and its historical orientation. Formally, leftist politics, or more precisely the term "left", have their origin in eighteenth-century France. In this setting, the left was called the "party of movement", while the right was considered the "party of order". During the French Revolution of 1789, those deputies

who sat on the left benches of the Assembly opposed monarchy, while those sitting on the right expressed support for it (Yaqubi, 2015). After the revolution, the socialists, social democrats, and progressives continued to sit on the left benches. Subsequently the words "left" and "right", used to describe these orientations, started to expand to other countries and regions of the world. By the mid-1930s the term "leftist" was introduced in the parliament of Britain, and

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**Citation:** Ayaz, M., Naz, S., & Ali, F. (2023). The Prominent Leftist Leaders of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: An Appraisal. *Global Social Sciences Review*, VIII(II), 528-540.

[https://doi.org/10.31703/gssr.2023\(VIII-II\).48](https://doi.org/10.31703/gssr.2023(VIII-II).48)

DOI: 10.31703/gssr.2023(VIII-II).48

URL: [http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gssr.2023\(VIII-II\).48](http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gssr.2023(VIII-II).48)

at the same time it was also manifesting its essence in British India (Mignet, [2018](#)).

The word "left" is a theoretical disposition, as it opposes the right-wing status quo politics, but it does so on a political spectrum, with varying interpretations and methodologies in different countries of the world (Raza, [2013](#)). Generally, there is a consensus among political scientists that "leftist" includes anarchists, communists, socialists, social democrats, and those who work for the eradication of social inequalities. However, in the context of British India and post-colonial Pakistan, leftist politics had four main characteristics: 1) It must have a broad support base in class organizations, 2) a socialist orientation in its ideology, 3) an explicit inclination towards the Soviet Union or China, 4) and an anti-imperialist stand on foreign policy (Yaqubi, [2015](#)).

In this context, there was a thin sharp line between the nationalist revolutionaries and the socialist revolutionaries in the context of their resistance and struggle against British colonial rule in India. Until 1917, it was either local Islamic networks or *Pan-Islamist* ethno-religious nationalism that challenged British imperial power in northwestern India, while after the Socialist revolution of October 1917, socialist revolutionaries and soft left secularist parties dominated the scene as far as anti-colonial activities are concerned (Salim, [2008](#)).

However, this line seems sharp only from the point of view of organized parties—from the top-down view. When we look at individuals and their life choices, we find that it was often the same individuals involved in both trends. The remarkable nationalist and Pan-Islamist leaders of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, who became avowed Muslim socialists later, were many; leaders alone could include Abdul Rahim Popalzai, Abdul Rab Peshawari, Mohammad Shafiq, and Fazal Mahmood Makhfi, all of whom were trained religious scholars and all of whom were convinced that the anti-imperial war could be won only through a socialist revolution (Ansari, [2015](#)). Counter to Ansari, Haroon ([2008](#)), and others, however, it is the contention here that these individuals were not socialist despite their Islamic commitments, but because of them. It is their mode of Islam, and the region's specific kinds of pre-existing Islamic activism, which led to the adoption of socialism later. Both schools of

thought, in the frontier, emphasized social responsibility and reform, radical egalitarianism, rule of law against imperial arbitrary rule, and anti-imperialism and autonomy (Caron, [2016a](#)); (Caron & Dasgupta, [2016](#)); (Saikia, [2016](#)).

Therefore, to draw out the full complexity of leftist expression and political subjectivity in the NWFP, but also to draw out its connections to other parts of society and social history, this research paper will explore and engage the family background, education, and intellectual contribution of following Six leftist leaders, which may provide a possibility to understand the history and current state of leftist politics in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Beyond these case studies, however, a fuller list of leftist leaders of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan could be very long, and most broadly speaking could include anti-colonial Pan-Islamists, nationalists, and Marxist-Leninists, who carried their work in British colonial India and died in post-colonial Pakistan after independence.

### **Khushal Khan Khattak (1882-1962): A Communist Leader of Southern Pakhtunkhwa**

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Khushal Khan Khattak Bahadarkhelvi (1882-1962) was born in British colonial India, into a very religious family of village Bahadarkhel, Kohat division of Northwest Frontier Province, (present-day Takht-i-Nasrati Tehsil of Karak, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa). His father Tal Khan Khattak was a religious person and an eminent *Sufi* scholar of his time. He sponsored the construction of a mosque (*Speen Jumaat*) in front of his hujra, where he taught spiritualism to his followers. Thus, Khushal Khan and his two brothers were taught spiritualism and Islamic education by his father in childhood, as there was no formal school system in the area. Khushal Khattak learned the Holy Quran, Hadith, and Islamic Jurisprudence from his father in his mosque's madrasa (Personal Communication with R. Siddiqi:2021). His younger brother, Yousaf Khan Khattak was later admitted to the well-known religious seminary, the Darul Uloom at Deoband, and after graduation, like many graduates of Deoband's early twentieth-century generation, came back to his hometown and established a more formal madrasa called Anwar-ul-Uloom at his father's mosque (Dewana, [1997](#)).

For his part, Khushal, as noted above, had his early education mostly in the traditional Islamic arts and sciences at his village Bahadarkhel, in his father's mosque; and for further education, his father managed to secure the services of his friend and follower, Maulvi Daud Shah, who belonged to Tirah valley, in the tribal areas of Orakzai Agency. It is said that Maulvi Daud Shah was a pan-Islamist scholar, as many were at the time, and was also a wanted anti-colonial activist of the day. He is said to have had a full grasp of four languages, (Arabic, Persian, Hindi-Urdu, and Pashtu) due to which he was in a good position to interact with émigré revolutionaries in Kabul, and beyond. To Khushal, he taught Persian literature, *Fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) and *Hadith* (the science of traditions of the Prophet Mohammad, PBUH). He also provided him with political training, aimed at equipping him to carry out a revolutionary anti-colonial struggle against the British colonial government in India (Ghamgeen, 1991).

Because of his Islamic background and close association with Pan-Islamic activism, Khushal became so active in organizing social and political activities, in the erstwhile FATA and NWFP, that he challenged the landed elites of his village, who had the support and backing of British colonial authorities. Thus, anti-imperialism and Islam were already linked to class conflict, in a single moral economy of activism, for the young Khushal. His political activities drew the attention of the British government soon, and he was charged with an alleged criminal incident. His name was put on a list for surveillance and possible arrest. As a result of this, he managed to migrate secretly to Tirah Valley, where his teacher Maulana Daud Shah was carrying out anti-colonial revolutionary work. He stayed with Daud Shah for quite some time, before proceeding to Baku, in Azerbaijan. This was a time when émigré revolutionaries, working outside India for the liberation of their homeland, were making connections with the tribal region of British India. Thus, Khushal came close to émigré revolutionaries and was one of those Pan-Islamist nationalists who was inspired by the October 1917 Socialist Revolution in Soviet Russia. It is said that Maulvi Daud took Khushal through the Wakhan strip to the Soviet Union and onward to Azerbaijan, and then once the Hijrat movement took off, he took him to Tashkent, where he

attended the *Induski Kurs* (Indian Military School) described earlier. He gained further political training at the University of the Toilers of the East in Moscow (K. K. Khattak, 1961). He therefore also played a major role in the Khilafat and Hijrat movements described earlier, and like many other Pan-Islamists, he had reached the conclusion that an organized socialist revolution would best serve the cause of liberating an Islamic homeland from British Imperial rule in India (Dewana, 1997).

Khushal came back to Bahadarkhel in the late 1920s to start his activities in his hometown, where his younger brother Maulana Yousaf, was carrying out his teaching of Islamic education in his madrasa Anwar-ul-Uloom. His brother, however, had also made friends with the hardliner Maulana Mufti Mehmood of Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind (JUH), later to be a rising star in populist and eventually anti-leftist religious circles. Khushal started his CPI programs and progressive activities in his hujra, directly opposite the mosque where his younger brother was gaining popularity as an eminent Pan-Islamist member of JUH. It seems quite contradictory at the present time to describe these ideologically different political programs as being on one page against British imperialism in India. However, it is worth mentioning that these two ideologies had evolved a consensus to get rid of British imperialism, and both supported self-critical reform of harmful social customs, as well as opposition to the local elites who abetted imperial rule. To put it in simple words, these two components, i.e. hujra and mosque, respectively represented Communist and Islamic notions at the same time, in a congruent manner and supplementing each other rather than conflicting. Even if it seems incongruous now, the communist ideology and politics of left-leaning organizations had historical connections with religious activism and pan-Islamic nationalism on a deep social and even moral level that helped them develop working relationships with each other.

Khushal was also a member of the All-India Kisan Sabha from Northwest Frontier Province in the late 1920s. The other NWFP members were Sanubar Hussain Kakaji, Ziarat Gul Lala, and Ram Saran Nagina. He was a founding member of the Kisan Jirga when it was established in the 1930s in the NWFP and was also a member of the provincial committee of the CPI. He worked for the Naujawan Bharat Sabha (NBS), which was an

anti-imperial organization quite active in Punjab and NWFP as noted earlier. Khushal was arrested on account of his role in the protest at the Qissa Khwani massacre of 1930, which was a joint militant struggle by the NBS and the Khudai Khidmatgar movement against British rule. He spent three years in jail along with other Congress and Communist Party members.

The CPI was banned as an organization, and when he was released from jail in the mid-1930s, he decided to operate underground, carrying out his work in more mainstream leftist organizations. This provided Khushal, an opportunity to interact with other Pakhtun nationalists, and he started to work with Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan in his organization, the Khudai Khidmatgar Movement (KKM). The KKM was already somewhat leftist and progressive in its orientation, aiming at peasant empowerment as well as regional autonomy, but within that framework Khushal and other colleagues in the movement—also members of the banned CPI—formed a forward bloc in the KKM to carry out their more specifically communist project. Regarding this context, Ajmal Khattak (1925-2010), a progressive poet and nationalist, notes that the hujra of his father was considered a sort of party office for holding political meetings and other activities of the KKM. The records and minutes of these meetings were stored in almirahs in their house, as Khattak recalled in his childhood memories, but when the forward bloc came into existence, these almirahs were also divided into two sets: one was for the records of the KKM, and the other was used by communists of the forward bloc (A. Khattak, [2005](#)).

Although the KKM was a left-leaning nationalist organization affiliated with the All-India National Congress (AINC), it was not fully able to bear the heavy weight of specifically socialist or communist activities against British imperial rule in India. Soon the relationship of Khushal and other communists with the KKM turned tense because of serious political differences, and this was particularly the case after the KKM-Congress became an officially elected partner in rule during the later 1930s. Khushal was deeply upset by the atrocities visited by the KKM government against the poor peasants of Ghala Dher in 1937-38 and of Mufti Abad in 1939 (Popalzai, [1990](#)). Along with Maulana Abdul Rahim Popalzai, he stood there with the

peasant against the landed elites, who were supported by the government and delivered fierce speeches at the sites of the uprisings. He was arrested by what he had once considered his own government, that of Dr Khan Sahib (the brother of Abdul Ghaffar Khan), on account of his role of his in mobilizing peasants. Once the KKM was elected and came to depend upon AINC and British support as much or more than grassroots support, Khushal sensed an increasingly dominant role of bourgeoisie and landed elites in the upper brass of the movement; and at this point, Khushal and many of his fellow communists left the organization. In an interview with his grandson, Rehmanullah Sidiqi, who is currently a member of the Central Committee of the Mazdoor-Kisan Party (MKP), Sidiqi related that Khushal never again accepted to work with the KKM. Even though Khushal was offered a ticket to contest the 1946 elections, he refused to contest elections from the platform of such a party that supported landed elites against peasants and workers.

In accordance with the decision of his party, the CPI, on the question of the right of self-determination for the Muslims of the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent, Khushal supported the demand for Pakistan and also provided his help to the Muslim League (ML) in the elections of 1946. In the referendum, he played his part in supporting Pakistan as the right option for the people of NWFP. Then in 1948, when the CPP was formed, he worked as acting secretary of the party in NWFP after the arrest of Mohammad Hussain Ata. His other fellows, Ziarat Gul, Abdul Sattar Lala, and Afzal Bangash were among the pioneers who had organized and strengthened the CCP in NWFP.

Khushal too, however, was arrested in 1948 and jailed for two years. His brother, as well as his son Gul Janan Khattak, were also arrested in 1950 on allegations of distributing communist literature (Branch, [1975](#)). Soon after his release, he was put under house arrest for three years, only to again be arrested in 1958, during Ayub Khan's first military coup. Even in his old age, he remained a victim of state repression and discriminatory punishment. His family members were also harshly treated, arrested, and put in prison from time to time, in politically engineered allegations. His family was therefore forced to migrate to Karachi for labour work in 1960, where

the ageing Khushal, who was also sick now, lived for two years.

Khushal's health conditions further deteriorated and his son, Gul Janan Khattak, decided to move back to their hometown of Bahadarkhel, Kohat in 1962. On September 19, 1962, Khushal Khan Khattak, breathed his last while offering the *Isha* (evening) prayer. It is said that shortly after he prayed *Isha*, he laid his head on the ground as if to take a nap. He was laid to rest in his family home's graveyard on September 20, 1962. Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto came to the village for condolences, when he parted ways with Gen. Ayub Khan in 1965. Khushal's son, who was also working in the CPP in Karachi, was later executed in 1964, on account of his communist activities (Ghamgeen, 1991).

### **Maulana Abdul Rahim Popalzai (1890-1944): A Pakhtun Marxist Mufti of Peshawar**

Abdul Rahim Popalzai (1890-1944) is another individual whose life shows the local inspirations behind the adoption of more formal leftist positions later on. Popalzai was born in Peshawar and belonged to a branch of the Durrani Pakhtun tribe of Afghanistan. His father Abdul Hakim Popalzai was a graduate of the madrasa at Deoband and had also travelled to other Islamic seminaries located at Lucknow and Rampur for gaining other modes of Islamic knowledge (Farooq, 1998). He also served as headmaster of Moeeniya, a spiritual-philosophical-mystical institution, at the shrine city of Ajmer Sharif. Upon his return to Peshawar, he was appointed as grand *mufti* (head jurisprudential authority) under British colonial rule there (Popalzai, 1990).

Completing early Islamic education from his father at home, Abdul Rahim was himself admitted to the Deoband madrasa in 1908, where he studied from Mahmud-ul-Hasan "Shaikh al-Hind", and from him imbibed anti-colonial sentiments of extreme anger against British imperialism. Upon graduation from Deoband, he established and started teaching at his own madrasa and soon became influenced by Pan-Islamist activities, via his father's attachment to the *Khilafat* Committee. Thus, he entered the arena of contestation in the politically charged environment of the *Khilafat* Movement and its

follow-up movement of *Hijrat* to Afghanistan and beyond to Soviet Tashkent (Popalzai, 1990).

Popalzai is an example of a Muslim socialist who had a background of political affiliation with Pan-Islamist ideology, but in the fight against British imperialism, he ended up much closer to a formal Marxist-Leninist position. Like Maulvi Barkatullah Bhopali, in some statements he claimed that Islam is his faith while socialism for him was a 'political weapon' direly needed to fight British imperialism. Elsewhere, though, he also noted that both commitments were based on his adherence to principles of responsibility to God and to God's created world, principles that derive from *wahdat-ul-wujud*, the unity and interconnection of all existence (Caron 2016). In any case, during the interwar and WW1 years, he decided to join Hizballah, a militant organization involving both Maulana Azad (who espoused a similar idea about *wahdat-ul-wujud*) and Shaikh-ul-Hind. Unlike those global members he remained grounded in the daily life of the Peshawar Valley and also, later on, helped found the NBS there (Caron, 2016b). He was also a member of the Frontier Socialist Party. Through all these channels he focused not on network-based subversive activism, as was Hizballah's earlier focus, but rather focused on structural activism in the cause of peasants and working classes (Farooq, 1998).

He organized a variety of different cadres among various working-class professionals, by forming a range of associations like the Tangaban Union (for horse-cart workers); Wror Bhai (for wheelbarrow hauliers) Khakroob (for janitors) and a range of other trade unions (Marwat, 2005). Through this means, janitors, menders, sweepers, and other members of the lowest classes were mobilized to raise their voices against imperialism, as when Popalzai organized the first All-India Sweepers Conference (Marwat 2005). Finally, in addition to social organizing, Popalzai worked in establishing newspapers like *Sarfarosh*, which was published from Peshawar in 1927, *Nawjawan-i-Sarhad* which was published in 1928, and *Chingari* which was published alongside the other two (Haroon, 2008). As one of the undisputed organizational, as well as moral, leaders of the peasant agitation at Ghala Dher, and as a result of seditious speeches at Kohat, Bannu, and Waziristan, he was arrested by Dr Khan Sahib's government on charges of

sedition speech and promotion of socialist ideology, and imprisoned in Haripur Jail (Popalzai, 1990). Notwithstanding these experiences, his position as one of the region's greatest leaders of peasants was solidified when he organized the Hazara Kisan conference, which was attended by 100, 000 people (Khan, 1988).

Along with his attachment to Islamic ideals, and even (in his own mind) to an extent because of those ideals, he was a practising socialist throughout his life, as he worked for the uplift of the working classes. He was popularized as *Sarhad ka Karl Marx* (Karl Marx of the Frontier), because of his work in Marxist organizations and parties, while as an intellectual he was a known progressive poet of Urdu and wrote many poems for peasants and socialist revolution. His political career and services in the cause of socialism won him a reputation across all social strata as a great politician of the peasantry.

Due to prolonged stays behind bars, with hard labour and inappropriate treatment by various authorities of jails, his health conditions deteriorated rapidly. By 1941, he had been serving a hard time in D. I. Khan jail, as he was denied the status of political prisoner, when the then-Deputy Commissioner Sikandar Mirza visited his cell and ordered a relaxation of his conditions and his sentence, because of his bad health. Mirza then tendered an apology, in a letter to Popalzai, and released him in 1943. Of course, soon after his release, Popalzai visited Kashmir twice, despite his severe illness, for peasant conferences in 1944. He died on May 31, 1944, and was laid to rest in his mosque, Masjid Qasim Ali Khan, Peshawar (W. Ali, 1995).

### **Sanubar Hussain “Kakaji” (1897-1963)**

Sanubar Hussain Mohmand “Kakaji” (1897-1963) was another pioneer of the communist movement in NWFP. He was a progressive poet and a prolific writer, and the founder of Anjuman-i-Nawjawan-i-Hind (which grew into the Naujawan Bharat Sabha). He was born in British colonial India on January 3, 1897, at Village Kagawala, on the Kohat Road in Peshawar. He received an early Islamic education in his village before attending Islamia College Peshawar, from where he passed Intermediate (F.A). Soon after completion of education, he joined Government service as a school teacher in 1917 (Khalil, 2011).

Besides teaching in a government school, his interests grew as he read progressive papers and was attracted by Pan-Islamist revolutionary activities against British imperialism. It was at the beginning of the Khilafat Movement and its offshoot Hijrat to Afghanistan that Kakaji resigned from his government job and joined the caravan of the Islamic reformer, educationalist, and militant pir Haji Sahib Turangzai, heading toward Afghanistan. Like Maulana Barkat Ullah, the Pan-Islamist leader of Bhopal, Sanubar Hussain was also inspired by the socialist revolution in Soviet Russia, and he was among the pioneers of the Communist Party of India in NWFP. He also sought to organize the peasants and workers and for that, he formed the Kisan cadre of the CPI in the province. In 1926, he founded *Jamiat-i-Naujawan-i-Sarhad*, (Party of Frontier Youth) which was a Marxist-Leninist organization. His fellow NWFP comrades Abdul Rehman Riyya, Abdul Aziz Khushbash, Khushal Khan Khattak, Bakhshi Faqir Chand, and Lala Roshan Lal were among the other pioneer members of this group. This organization was so popular among the leftist circles throughout India that in the late 1920s, a similar organization with the name Naujawan Baharat Sabha (NBS) was established in other provinces; however, it worked under the name of Naujawan-i-Sarhad in this province. Sanubar Hussain also had a close association with the Kirti Kisan Party of Punjab, while working as president of NBS in 1929.

Because of his particular mode of socialist politics, which espoused class struggle against landed elites and imperialism, Kakaji strongly opposed the philosophy of non-violence advocated by Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan and Mahatma Gandhi. He considered it an apparatus of the British colonial masters to establish and maintain their imperial power and he viewed it as against the very nature of Pashtun tradition to passively tolerate oppressive rule. He gave the example of the Pashtun community and society as an embodiment of socialist philosophy.

He was charged in the aftermath of the Qissa Khwani massacre of 1930 and was imprisoned along with Khushal and Popalzai in D. I. Khan Jail for two years on account of his speeches and anti-state activities. After his release from jail, he started publishing a weekly magazine *Sailab* (“The Flood”) from Peshawar which was a revolutionary and progressive publication. It

quickly received the attention of the public and especially progressive circles, but the government reacted sharply by banning the magazine and issuing another arrest order against Kakaji. However, Kakaji evaded this possible arrest by escaping to the Tribal Areas on the Anglo-Afghan border. There, Kakaji spent almost 18 years in self-exile, up until the independence of Pakistan in 1947, in striving to carry out his revolutionary struggle for the liberation of his homeland from British colonial rule. He established a publishing house for the printing and dissemination of progressive and revolutionary literature via a cyclostyle machine in Sawal Qila (Jamal, 2020). He started editing the monthly *Shola* ("Flame") which was published in three languages—Urdu, Pashtu and Persian—and a bi-lingual weekly *Sarfaroosh* in the 1930s, both of which were circulated in the tribal areas. He helped Bhagat Ram Talwar in securing the safe escape of Subash Chandra Bose to Japan via Afghanistan (Talwar, 1976). Renowned borderland militant religious leaders and scholars like Haji Mohammad Amin, Faqir of Ipi, the followers of Maulana Najam-ud-Din Nangarhari (Hadda Mulla), and Khushal Khan Khattak were his close comrades in the revolutionary struggle.

After the creation of Pakistan, Kakaji devoted his full energy and time to the development of progressive literary activities. He was perhaps the first poet and writer from NWFP who joined the All India Progressive Writer Association (AIPWA) which was founded by Syed Sajjad Zaheer, Rashid Jehan, Ahmad Ali, and other notable socialists in London in 1936. He maintained a close association with Sibti-i-Hassan, Ahmad Nadeem Qasimi, and other prominent members of AIPWA. Zaheer had mentioned in his book, *Rushnai* that he visited NWFP to meet the progressive literary individuals and named especially Kakaji in this connection.

It was under the influence of AIPWA that Kakaji founded the Olasi Adabi Jirga (OAJ) in 1950, which was a landmark progressive literary contribution and proved to be an invaluable source for upcoming generations of progressive poets, litterateurs, and writers.

Kakaji was arrested in 1951 and sent to jail. At this, Qalandar Mohmand wrote a poem '*Kakaji Ta*' (To Kakaji) in which he lamented how Kakaji had struggled in painful conditions against the British to attain independence, only to be

imprisoned (Mohmand, 1986). Under Ayub Khan's Martial Law administration, he was again arrested in 1958 and jailed for three more years. He fell quite weak, as he was infected by a lung-related disease in jail, and he died on January 3, 1963, in what has been described as a very heart-wrenching condition (Jamal, 2020). Kakaji Sanubar Hussain was laid to rest in the graveyard of his hometown Kaga Wala near his mother's tomb in accordance with his will.

### Ziarat Gul (1918-1979)

Comrade Ziarat Gul was born in 1918 in an agrarian family of village Zarefi, Mardan District. His forefathers had migrated from Mohmand territory in the nineteenth century, in connection with agricultural work. He received primary education from Government School in Hathian, Mardan; however, before enrolling in secondary school, Gul dropped out (Branch, 1952).

He went to Bombay to work as a labourer and started residing with one of his relatives. In an interview with his elder son Dr Aman Gul Safi, Safi stated that his father was influenced by Marxist thinking in Bombay because of his frequent meetings with members of the trade unions there. He further confirmed that he had seen a red card in his father's almirah with five cornered stars. It seemed to him that this was most likely a membership card for the CPI or its associated Trade Union. According to Safi, there was no doubt at the very least that Gul had been an active member of trade union politics in Mumbai. A Special Branch note sheet, in the Directorate of Archives and Libraries, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, goes further to claim that Gul was a confirmed communist leader, whose name was put on a list for surveillance in the CID and secret agencies records (Branch, 1975).

Upon his return from Bombay, he joined the District Committee Mardan CPI in 1941. Kaptan Sarfaraz Khan of Amir Abad, Abdul Satar Lala, and Sharif Khan of Dhakki Charsadda, were other local members of the CPI. Together they organized the Kisan Jirga in Peshawar, Charsadda, Mardan, and Malakand, which produced awareness, especially among the peasants of Hashtnagar valley.

Like Khushal, Kakaji, and other communists, Gul had also closely worked with the ML because the CPI had accepted the demand of Pakistan and

recommended to its members to either join the ML or provide support to ML candidates against the AINC in the 1945 elections. Thus, Gul supported Mohammad Amin, son of Haji Lal Jan, from the ML against Mian Zarin Khan of the KKM in that election (Report, [1969](#)).

Soon after the creation of Pakistan, the CPP could not continue its cordial relationships with the ML once Pakistan joined the anti-communist camp and signed agreements like SEATO and CENTO. Therefore, the members of the CCP, including Gul, turned their attention to the mobilization of peasants and workers. At the beginning of February 1948, Gul was elected Secretary of the Kisan Jirga. The same year, he was appointed by the party leadership (Sajjad Zaheer) as In-charge, of the Kisan Front in the NWFP to organize peasant agitation against the landed elites of Peshawar, Mardan, and Charsadda. According to a note sheet produced by British intelligence, the scheme was to initiate open conflict between landlords and their tenants from the tribal territories who had settled in Charsadda and Mardan, who would then flee to the tribal areas and approach the tribesmen there to support militant raids on the settled districts (Branch, [1967](#)).

Gul travelled secretly to Lahore and met Sajjad Zaheer in the house of Mian Iftikhar-ud-Din to seek the party's advice on the further mobilization of peasants in Hashtnagar. However, the government took timely action by filing an FIR under section 3 of the Government Public Safety Act against Gul and his fellow comrades, for distributing a pamphlet, "Inqilab-i-Cheen Zindabad," ("Long Live the Chinese Revolution") among the public. Subsequently, the government issued a warrant for Gul's arrest. At this point, he began operating underground to evade arrest and remained so for years. Meanwhile, the government arrested Kakaji and Ata in 1951, and therefore Gul was elevated to the role of the CPP's acting secretary (Report, [1969](#)).

In 1963, Major Ishaq Mohammad was elected as convener of the West Pakistan Kisan Committee, while Gul was elected as Secretary General. From NWFP, Shaheen Shah Bacha of Umarzai was elected convener of Kisan Jirga, while Imtiaz Alam was elected as convener of the Punjab Kisan Committee. Abdul Majeed Sindhi was elected as convener for the Sindh Hari

Committee, while in Baluchistan, the Kisan Committee was inactive (S. Ali, [2012](#)).

In the 1970 Hashtnagar peasant uprising, Gul, along with Abdul Sattar, Sher Ali Bacha, and Afzal Bangash, had successfully occupied around 200 square kilometres of the best agricultural lands (Ayaz & Dr Noor-Ul-Amin, [2023](#)). Amidst this Gul spoke to a large gathering in Mandani in 1970 against the forceful eviction of peasants (Ahmad, [2009](#)). The khans and landed elites had also formed a group, which was also backed by government institutions and law enforcement agencies. However, despite the application of heavy force by police and by the Frontier constabulary, the peasants emerged successful in the end. Mohammad Afzal Bangash dismissed allegations in the government media which termed it a "tribal war", and explained in various speeches that it was actually a class struggle (Bangash, [1972](#)).

Gul was admitted to Lady Reading Hospital, on account of prolonged illness and died on January 17, 1979. He was buried in his ancestral graveyard at Zarifi Banda, Mardan.

### **Abdul Sattar Khan (1922-96)**

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Abdul Sattar Khan was born in 1922 in the village of Khadi Kalay, District Mardan. He was a close relative of Comrade Ziarat Gul, and both belonged to the Safi tribe of Mohmand. Among peasant leaders and activists, he was popularly known as Sattar Lala. After completing High School, Sattar Lala travelled to Bombay along with his grandfather to visit his relatives, who had settled there to work as labourers. During his stay, he visited the CPI office and met Gul and other party members at a young age (Personal Communication with Emel: 2022).

In a recorded interview of Sattar Lala, he confessed that at the time of his visit to Bombay, he had not yet taken any interest in politics. He would read party literature, as he recalled in his memories, but could not understand its philosophy. A few months later, his father wrote a letter to Sattar Lala, asking him to return to his hometown as his mother had passed away. Sattar Lala returned as soon as he received his father's letter, but it turned out to be a ruse to get him back so that he would start his studies again.

However, upon his return, he did not want to continue his schooling and started farming along



with his father. Then one day he visited Mardan city along with Ziarat Gul, who took him to the CPI office. There Sattar Lala met an old man with a familiar face, someone he had met in Bombay a couple of years back. This was Mohammad Hussain Ata, the Provincial Secretary of the CPI at the time in 1945-48. This was the meeting, according to his interview, that changed his thinking and inspired him to work for the toilers and lower classes of society. He joined the CPI District Committee, Mardan, in 1945 and participated in the meetings of the Kisan Jirga, convened by Gul. The other members of the Jirga were, Kakaji, Niazbat Khan, Mohammad Afzal Bangash, and Khushal.

Sattar Lala was very instrumental in the early years of Pakistan, as most of the top brass of the CPP were sent behind bars and many leaders went underground to evade possible arrest. Especially after the arrests of Ata, Khushal, and Kakaji, in the 1950s, Sattar Lala extended support to Gul, who was working as acting secretary at that time. He organized a Peasant Conference in Hashtnagar in 1960, which was attended by thousands of peasants and workers (Khan, Qadir. Khan, 1978).

Being a key member of the Kisan Committee, Sattar Lala was the co-organizer of the Hashtnagar Peasant uprising of the 1970s. Sher Ali Bacha, and proletarian poets, would present their class-centric poems in these gatherings. A number of clashes between the charged mob and police and paramilitary officers resulted in several casualties. Around a dozen peasants were killed and hundreds were wounded in the war that ensued. However, it is also a fact that peasants successfully expropriated around 200 square kilometres of the region's best agricultural land, and weakened the authority of landed elites (Azghar, 1968).

This was a highly mobilized uprising that exerted a widespread influence on the other parts of the country and locally transformed the political economy of rural society. Abdul Sattar was expelled from the MKP at this point, however, on account of his alleged involvement in instigating peasants to adopt violent means for achieving political objectives. He and Chairman Adam Khan, therefore, formed the MKP-Adam Khan Group, while the MKP-Bangash and MKP-Sher Ali splintered from each other in the 1970s (N. Ali, 2019).

Sattar Lala also attended the Swat congress of the CPP in 1992 where the Communist Party of Pakistan was dissolved after the delegates presented their arguments. Due to a lung-related ailment, he spent the last two years of his life in bed, with proper medication. He died on December 6, 1996 and was laid to rest in his village graveyard, at Khadi Kalley, Mardan.

### **Mohammad Afzal Bangash (1924-1988): The Co-founder of the MKP**

Mohammad Afzal Bangash belonged to a family who owned around 20 acres of the best agricultural land in the village Shadikhel, located fifteen kilometres southwest of Kohat Bazar. His father Mohammad Akbar Khan Bangash, a prosperous farmer, was also a practising lawyer in the District Courts Kohat, while his grandfather had retired from the British Army (Moghul, 2017).

His family shifted from their village to the main city, Bannu Bazar Kohat, and his father constructed a house in Niazi Muhallah around 1920, where Afzal Bangash was born on April 16, 1924. He received his early education in his hometown from Government High School Kohat before proceeding to Islamia College Peshawar in 1940. He passed F.A. in 1942 and B.A. in 1944 from Islamia College with a growing interest in law. It was in 1944 that he moved to Lahore to take admitted to Law College, University of Punjab, where he completed his L.L.B degree (Ahmed, 1986).

During his stay in Lahore, he came in touch with progressive and left-leaning senior students like Sardar Shaukat Ali (1923-2003), Abdullah Malik (1920-2003), Eric Cyprian and Muslim Shamim, who were members of the CPI and who participated in the activities of the PWA. Upon completion of his law degree at Lahore, he came to Peshawar and started practice at the High Court in 1945-47 where he came into close contact with more experienced and trained communists like Kakaji, Ata, Gul, and Khushal (Branch, 1975). Among his other friends included Farigh Bukhari (1917-1997), Mirza Raza Hussain Hamdani (1910-1999), and Ajmal Khattak (1926-2008), all of whom were associated with progressive organizations.

In the newly established Olasi Adabi Jirga (OAJ) he got the opportunity to meet that

generation's range of nationalist and often progressive authors such as Amir Hamza Shinwari (1907-1994), Qalandar Mohammad (b. 1930) Master Abdul Karim (1908-1961), Dost Mohammad Kamil (1915-1981), and Khatir Ghaznavi (1910-1976). He would participate in Marxist study circles and would read CPP literature like *Qaumi Jang* (People's War). Even though he was a successful lawyer and was short-listed for a post in the higher judiciary, he decided to work as a full-time member of the CPP and was elected as a member of the provincial working committee from NWFP (Rahman, [2016](#)).

In December 1948, he delivered a speech at Kohat in a meeting, under the auspices of the Kisan Committee (KC), which was convened by Comrade Ziarat Gul. He explained the aims and objectives of the KC. According to CID reports, the meeting decided to establish a number of sub-committees of the KC, which had the alleged purpose of making contacts inside the rank and file of the Pakistan Army for infiltrating subversive propaganda. It is also reported that Mohammad Hussain Ata, the Provincial Secretary of CPP-Sarhad, had visited Kohat in 1949 to organize the District Committee of the party. Afzal Bangash was elected Secretary of District Committee Kohat of the CPP in 1949, which had by then provoked the government, and his name was put onto a surveillance list. Because of this reason, as well as political necessity, he decided to shift his residency to Kohat Road, Peshawar, in 1950, and there he found an opportunity to visit the comrades in Charsadda, Mardan and Malakand region in connection with party work. In the same year, he was elected as secretary of the District Committee Peshawar after Mazhar-ul-Haq served out his tenure (Branch, [1975](#)).

Bangash was invited by the Secretary of the Union of Progressive Writers, USSR, for a conference in 1951. He issued a press statement over the restrictions by the Frontier government that did not allow him and other delegates to travel to Moscow. After the CPP was banned, he joined Sarhad Awami League while continuing underground communist work. Afzal Bangash was among the founding members who came to the conclusion that all leftist and progressive political parties should merge to form the National Awami Party (NAP) in 1957, and he was then elected its General Secretary while Wali Khan was elected as President. Under the banner

of NAP, he worked rigorously to make the KC functional on the provincial, district, and village levels (N. G. Ali, [2020](#)).

Bangash's differences with the senior leadership of the NAP came to a head over several policy decisions, including his criticism of Peking's attack on Vietnam and matters related to the ejection of peasants. These mounting differences led to his expulsion from the NAP along with the Kisan Committee. Thus, along with the senior leadership of the KC including Syed Sher Ali Bacha, he became a founding member of the MKP, which came into existence on July 1, 1968. The peasants' resentments and anti-government sentiments further escalated when the NAP-JUI government was due to take its oath on April 24, 1970, because the khans and landed elites, most of them associated with NAP, had decided to eject peasants after the NAP government took its oath. It was then that the MKP led the peasant movement of the early 1970s in Hashtnagar valley, spreading up to Mardan, Malakand, Swat, and Dir; and Sattar Lala and Bangash played a great role in organizing the peasants, workers and labour class under the MKP's banner (Bangash, [1972](#)).

Speaking to a major gathering in Charsadda, Bangash responded to propaganda by landed elites by arguing that the uprising was a class struggle and a socialist movement, and there should not be any mistaken impression that this was a tribal war between Pashtun tribes, as had been claimed. In most of the skirmishes, the landed elites who were in confrontation with the MKP belonged to the NAP, the PPP, or the JUI.

On the same day, he visited the high court in Peshawar with the ban order and met Pir Masoom Shah, Dost Mohammad Kamil, Jalal-ud-Din Akbarji, and Inamullah advocates. He warned the PPP government that he would join the rising opposition movement if his ban was not lifted. This may have been a bluff, however. Afzal Bangash was not in favour of the PPP, thanks to its unfair conduct in dissolving the NWFP's provincial legislature after 1970 and its increasing authoritarianism since then. But he also had no sympathy for the other nine political parties that had united under the Pakistan National Alliance, PNA, over the issue of rigging in the 1977 general elections. He did not support the PNA movement and criticized them frequently, claiming that all they wanted was a share in the capitalist and

feudal system, and lambasted them for not having pro-people and pro-lower-class policies and programs (Taqi, 2010). By this point, however, he was very concerned about the kidnapping and missing of his party workers by the then government. Despite the sense of betrayal, he felt by the NAP, both for its earlier behaviour and now for its participation in the PNA movement, he reasoned that if nine political parties with a different political ideologies could come together to form an alliance for their political objectives, perhaps all the genuinely leftist political parties could also decide to forge a united opposition instead.

Afzal Bangash had very close contact with communist and progressive leaders of all neighbouring countries and made frequent visits to socialist countries. After the socialist revolution in Afghanistan, while he was addressing a meeting at Talab Korona, Charsadda, on December 7-8, 1978, he expressed his views in support of the communist revolution in Afghanistan. He said on the occasion that the program of the MKP and that of Noor Mohammad Tarakai's PDPA in Afghanistan were alike, in their attempts at getting rid of exploitative systems. He said that any claims of Tarakai being somehow un-Islamic was simply propaganda by the Western bloc against Noor Mohammad's government; rather he was a true Muslim leader. He said that mullahs of Afghanistan and Iran, with the support of the JI and the JUI in Pakistan, had started propaganda against the government of N. M. Tarakai, and once the Islamist leaders decided to leave Afghanistan they came to Pakistan where they were funded by international alliance to attack the government of N. M. Tarakai (Branch, 1975).

On September 24, 1978, Bangash criticized the military regime of Zia-ul-Haq in a gathering in the hujra of Salar Mohammad Shah Ali, Charsadda, for allegedly branding the workers and leaders of MKP as 'communists' solely on account of their progressive program, which they believed was in the best interests of Kisan and Mazdoor. Moreover, he also denounced the unnecessary prolongment of martial law, as Zia had not fulfilled his promise of holding General Elections within ninety days, and he raised an alarm that further extension of military rule, with

its ban on political parties and its military courts, would serve to eliminate socialism.

Mohammad Afzal died of kidney failure on October 28, 1986, and was buried in his ancestral graveyard at Kohat. The peasants of Hashtnagar and workers of the MKP decided to excavate his grave in 2008 and shifted his remains to a new graveyard erected in memory of the mobilization at Hashtnagar. During fieldwork, Aslam Gigyani disclosed this fact, and the researcher visited Afzal Bangash's mausoleum in July 2009. He is still remembered in the memories of the peasants of Hashtnagar because of his contribution to their struggle against landlordism. He was a Marxist thinker and theoretician who served as Provincial Secretary of the CPP, as founder of the MKP, as co-founder of the Pakistan Peace Committee, and—true to his conviction that socialism also involved regional devolution and rights—as the founder of the Sindhi-Baluchi-Pakhtun-Front (SBPF).

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This study of exploring the family background, personal lives, and political works of selected leftist leaders of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa concludes that leftist trends in art, literature, and politics of this province were the product of a long process of transformation. In a dialectical manner, it had preexisting roots in Pashto knowledge and in the inequalities of colonialism, in which anticolonialism often meant conflict against the class system and other divisions that the empire used as part of its rule. These leftist leaders were born and raised under the severe repression of British colonial rule in India and had carried out their work for the liberation of their motherland but however, it was so unfortunate that they continued to bear more severe state repression in post-colonial Pakistan. Even their names are mentioned nowhere in the national history of the freedom movement and liberation struggle which necessitates the attention of academia, policymakers and researchers. The findings of this study recommend including the names of these leftist leaders, their lives and struggles, in the national curriculum of Pakistan Studies and History as well as in the syllabus of schools and colleges of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

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