

THE PARADOX OF PROSPERITY: ECONOMIC LIBERALIZATION, STRUCTURAL SHIFT, AND AUTHORITARIAN GOVERNANCE IN ZIA-UL-HAQ'S PAKISTAN

IMRAN ALI*

ABSTRACT

The eleven-year tenure of General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq (1977-1988) represents a crucial and often contradictory phase in Pakistan's economic evolution. Emerging from a period of excessive state control and nationalization, the regime implemented a comprehensive strategy of economic liberalization, strategically outlined within the ambit of the Fifth (1978-1983) and Sixth (1983-1988) Five-Year Plans. This policy involved a pragmatic shift back toward private sector incentives, cautious deregulation, and the selective, yet persistent, Islamization of the financial framework. The decade's hallmark was a sustained, high average annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rate of 6.6 percent, leading to palpable gains in industrial output and a marked reduction in absolute poverty across the country. However, the apparent success of this liberalization was not primarily driven by the internal robustness of the policy reforms themselves, but rather by massive, non-endogenous geopolitical rents. Specifically, the economy was heavily subsidized by a substantial influx of foreign aid tied to Pakistan's frontline status in the Soviet-Afghan War, alongside unprecedented volumes of remittances from Pakistani workers in the Gulf states. This research contends that while Zia's policies successfully corrected the destructive imbalances inherited from the preceding administration, the high-growth phase ultimately failed to foster resilient, institutionally grounded development, instead deepening structural dependencies and fiscal vulnerabilities that would plague future democratic governments.

KEYWORDS: Zia-ul-Haq, Economic Liberalization, Five-Year Plans, Worker Remittances, Structural Dependence

* Independent Scholar. Email: morioimran098@gmail.com
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.65463/4>

The economic history of Pakistan is an account of dramatic policy swings, often mirroring the ideological orientation of the ruling political or military establishment. The imposition of martial law by General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq in 1977 initiated one such seismic shift, marking a definitive end to the state-socialism and nationalization frenzy that had characterized the preceding years under Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto (Naqvi and Sarmad 1984, 15). The new military regime swiftly embraced a policy of economic liberalization, not merely as a matter of ideological conviction, but as an existential necessity to revive a stagnant, inflation-ridden economy and, crucially, to build an economic foundation capable of sustaining and legitimizing authoritarian rule (Burki 1988, 1082). The strategy unfolded sequentially through the Fifth and Sixth Five-Year Plans, which provided the detailed, structured framework for deregulation, the renewed prioritization of private capital, and the careful introduction of Islamic economic elements. This comprehensive, top-down policy overhaul aimed to restore confidence among entrepreneurs and global investors alike.

The liberalization debate gains its complexity from the highly unusual geopolitical context in which it occurred. While the policy shift towards market pragmatism was crucial, the success metrics—particularly the impressive and sustained GDP growth rate—cannot be isolated from external financial inputs. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan at the end of 1979 instantly transformed Pakistan's strategic importance, unlocking massive conduits of military and economic aid from the United States and its allies, providing an enormous fiscal subsidy to the government (Siddiqa 2008, 110). Simultaneously, the

economic boom in the Gulf states ensured that worker remittances surged to record highs, injecting vital foreign exchange directly into the domestic economy and stimulating demand (Zaidi 2005, 99). This fortuitous combination of geopolitical rent and labor migration revenue provided a unique, unrepeatable fiscal cushion that heavily distorted the true measure of the regime's policy efficacy.

This paper posits that the economic liberalization under General Zia-ul-Haq, while fundamentally pragmatic and successful in achieving its immediate growth and stabilization objectives, was ultimately a strategy of *dependent* development. The policies addressed the short-term symptoms of the previous era's mismanagement but failed to tackle the deeper, long-term issues of institutional weakness and domestic resource mobilization (Husain 2005, 5). The simultaneous and often contradictory imperatives of liberalization (market efficiency) and Islamization (social equity through religious taxation) introduced new forms of market friction. Furthermore, the imperative to consolidate military power ensured that liberalization occurred within a framework that privileged patronage and concentrated control, undermining the establishment of truly competitive and transparent market institutions (Rizvi 2000, 115). The following sections will trace this historical arc, analyze the core policies of the two major five-year plans, and critically evaluate the resulting structural dependencies and institutional legacy that continue to challenge Pakistan's economic resilience.

The scholarly literature analyzing the Zia period's economic performance is fundamentally divided by interpretive perspective, settling primarily into the two

camps of the *growth-efficiency school* and the *structural-dependency critique*. The first school, often articulated by development economists and policy advisors, focuses almost exclusively on the impressive macroeconomic indicators achieved during the decade. Key findings emphasize that the government's decisive reversal of nationalization successfully restored private investor confidence, leading to a remarkable recovery in the large-scale manufacturing sector and a consistent, high rate of growth that outpaced all previous and subsequent civilian eras (Burki 1988, 1086). This literature champions the technical competence of the economic management team, arguing that their adoption of market principles, coupled with targeted infrastructure completion and the utilization of agricultural surpluses, was the true driver of prosperity (Hassan 1998, 22). For this group, the Zia era represents a compelling case for the immediate and positive results achievable through prudent, market-oriented governance, regardless of the underlying political system.

The opposing view, the *structural-dependency critique*, dismisses the headline growth figures as misleading and fundamentally unsustainable, attributing the prosperity almost entirely to external, non-endogenous factors. Scholars aligned with this view, such as S. Akbar Zaidi and Ayesha Siddiqa, provide compelling evidence that the massive geopolitical subsidies—US aid and remittances—were the primary financial catalysts, not sustainable domestic policy reform (Zaidi 2005, 105). They argue that the growth was largely consumption-driven, funded by foreign inflows, and therefore lacked the deep roots of domestic savings and productive investment necessary for long-term self-sufficiency (Siddiqa 2008, 120). Furthermore, this critique highlights the

inherent conflict between the liberalization agenda and the military regime's need for centralized control, pointing to the phenomenon of *Milbus* (military business) and the entrenchment of bureaucratic and military elites within the newly liberalized economy, which effectively skewed resource allocation and perpetuated institutional corruption rather than fostering genuine competition (Khan 2013, 30). This critical literature redirects the focus from short-term growth to the lasting vulnerabilities created by deferred tax reform and structural dependence on foreign rent.

This paper employs a mixed methodology rooted in historical analysis and political economy, drawing exclusively on a curated selection of scholarly and primary sources, the primary data is derived from the official documentation produced by the Zia regime's economic planning bodies, particularly the voluminous published reports of the Planning Commission detailing the Fifth and Sixth Five-Year Plans (Pakistan. Planning Commission 1984, 5; Govt. of Pakistan 1978a, 12). These documents are essential for establishing the stated objectives, sectoral priorities, and resource mobilization targets of the liberalization program, providing a critical baseline against which the actual economic and political outcomes of the decade are compared. The inclusion of primary source material, such as the initial evaluations of the *Zakat* and *Ushr* ordinances, further allows for an examination of the complexities introduced by the Islamization component of the economic policy.

The secondary research component involves the critical synthesis and cross-validation of academic works from various disciplines—development economics, political history, and sociology—to ensure a comprehensive and balanced argument. By

drawing upon a diverse selection of monographs and peer-reviewed articles, the analysis mitigates the risk of bias inherent in relying solely on either the pro-growth interpretations or the political economy critiques (Noman 1991, 101; Rizvi 1986, 1052). Empirical data concerning GDP, sectoral growth rates, and shifts in debt ratios are consistently corroborated across multiple scholarly assessments to solidify the factual basis of the argument. This methodological approach of triangulating the regime's policy statements against verified economic outcomes and critical institutional analysis allows the essay to move beyond a simplistic narrative and evaluate the true, long-term impact of liberalization under authoritarian governance.

THE HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS TO LIBERALIZATION (1947–1977)

The period leading up to General Zia-ul-Haq's takeover was marked by two distinct and contrasting economic philosophies that set the stage for the subsequent liberalization. The "Decade of Development" under Ayub Khan (1958-1969) was characterized by an aggressive, state-supported industrialization strategy, heavily influenced by Western development models that favored elite, concentrated capital (Wynbrandt 2009, 180). Although this period delivered impressive GDP growth rates, it was an unbalanced expansion that heavily relied on import substitution and massive injections of US aid, which primarily benefited a small industrial oligarchy (Gardezi 1983, 45). The resulting income inequality and concentration of wealth created profound political instability, ultimately feeding the regional and class resentments that culminated in the dismemberment of the country and the

subsequent political revolution that ushered in the Bhutto era in the early 1970s.

Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto fundamentally rejected the Ayub model, replacing it with a populist agenda based on "Islamic Socialism" and aggressive state intervention. The cornerstone of his policy was the nationalization of core industries—including banking, insurance, key manufacturing units, and even small-scale agro-processing—transferring control and management from the private sector to an often inefficient and politically motivated state bureaucracy (Govt. of Pakistan 1977, 5). While rhetorically appealing, the economic results were devastating: private investment plummeted due to fear of expropriation, industrial productivity declined, and the expansion of public sector employment led to massive operational losses that drained the national exchequer (Khan 2013, 25). This policy paralysis ensured that by the mid-1970s, the economy was characterized by low growth, high inflation, and profound industrial stagnation, creating the fiscal and political crisis that provided the perfect pretext for military intervention.

The economic landscape inherited by Zia in 1977 was thus deeply scarred by the failures of excessive state control. The public sector had ballooned into an unwieldy and loss-making leviathan, while the private sector suffered from a catastrophic collapse of confidence, marked by capital flight and an almost complete halt to new industrial investment (Noman 1991, 110). Furthermore, the political and civil disorder preceding the coup had exacerbated these economic woes, making the restoration of stability and the revival of capital accumulation the regime's immediate, non-negotiable priority (Hussain 1988, 35). This urgent need for economic revival served as the primary justification for

the continuation of martial law, transforming economic policy into an instrument of political legitimization.

In response to this inherited crisis, Zia's initial strategy was marked by caution rather than radicalism. Recognizing the instability caused by Bhutto's seizures, the regime's first steps were to provide strong, explicit guarantees against any future nationalization, a critical psychological signal aimed at rebuilding trust with the domestic business community (Hassan 1998, 25). The actual process of privatization was slow and selective in its early stages, focusing on returning only a few politically sensitive units, such as the Ittefaq Foundries, to their original owners, thereby testing the political waters before attempting mass denationalization (Zaidi 2005, 115). This pragmatic and deliberate approach to reversing the policies of the past ensured that economic recovery could begin gradually, while the political focus remained on consolidating the regime's power and neutralizing the opposition, establishing the necessary conditions for the structured reforms of the Five-Year Plans.

THE FIFTH FIVE-YEAR PLAN: STABILISATION AND GEOPOLITICAL WINDFALL (1978– 1983)

The Fifth Five-Year Plan (1978–1983) was launched with the primary goal of economic stabilization and the restoration of macroeconomic equilibrium, serving as the formal mechanism for the shift toward liberalization. The plan aimed to achieve a robust average annual GDP growth rate of 7.2 percent and targeted an ambitious 10 percent annual increase in industrial production, a clear indication of the regime's desire to quickly overcome the stagnation of the mid-1970s

(Govt. of Pakistan 1978a, 20). Unlike earlier plans, which often favored heavy, large-scale industrialization projects, the Fifth Plan strategically prioritized the development of the agriculture and water sectors, aiming to generate broad-based growth and utilize the recently completed infrastructure, such as the Tarbela Dam, to maximize output and enhance rural stability (Qureshi et al. 2003, 50). This focus on the foundational sectors was a pragmatic acknowledgement that sustained industrial recovery required a robust domestic demand base rooted in a thriving rural economy.

A central, though politically complex, feature of the Fifth Plan's implementation was the introduction of economic Islamization, including the institutionalization of the *Zakat* (mandatory wealth tax) and *Ushr* (agricultural tax) systems, mandated by a series of ordinances. This measure was politically crucial for the military government to legitimize its rule under an Islamic banner, distinguishing it from the secular-socialist predecessors (Mehmood 2002, 685). Economically, the objective was to create a formalized social safety net, utilizing *Zakat* funds to provide a direct transfer to the lowest income groups, which would theoretically enhance social equity and stability (Govt. of Pakistan 1979, 15). However, the system's actual fiscal impact remained marginal compared to the size of the national budget, and the simultaneous effort to institute non-interest-based banking introduced complex regulatory challenges, often resulting in financial instruments that merely substituted interest with profit-and-loss sharing equivalents, without fundamentally altering financial behavior.

The remarkable success in achieving, and in some metrics exceeding, the Fifth Plan's targets was profoundly shaped by external

forces beyond the regime's policy control. The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979 immediately transformed Pakistan into a crucial strategic partner for the West, particularly the United States (Burki 1988, 1090). This geopolitical shift resulted in massive financial flows, including generous aid packages and soft loans from the US, Saudi Arabia, and other Western allies, effectively subsidizing the government's budget and providing critical foreign exchange liquidity (Siddiq 2008, 125). This injection of non-repayable or highly concessional resources afforded the government the luxury of maintaining high levels of both defense and development expenditure without facing the political backlash associated with aggressive domestic tax mobilization, essentially providing an unparalleled fiscal cushion.

Concurrently, the economic prosperity of the Gulf region fueled the second major external factor: an unprecedented surge in worker remittances. As millions of Pakistanis migrated for employment, the funds they sent home peaked around 1982-1983, approaching \$3 billion annually—a sum nearly equivalent to the country's entire merchandise export earnings (Naqvi and Sarmad 1984, 80). This massive inflow had a direct and demonstrable impact on poverty reduction, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas, where it fueled a consumption boom, accelerated private investment in housing, and significantly increased the social mobility of recipient households (Zaidi 2005, 120). The resulting demand stimulus was a major catalyst for the revival of the industrial and service sectors, directly contributing to the sustained growth rates and providing a crucial measure of popular satisfaction that helped stabilize the military regime.

The industrial strategy during the Fifth Plan, though cautious, was strategically effective in reversing the capital flight. The regime coupled its non-nationalization guarantee with specific tax incentives and the easing of import restrictions on essential raw materials, signaling a credible, long-term commitment to a market economy (Hassan 1998, 28). This restoration of confidence led to a significant increase in large-scale manufacturing output, which averaged nearly 9 percent annually (Hussain 1988, 40). Furthermore, the introduction of a more flexible exchange rate regime in the early 1980s provided a boost to manufactured exports, which became increasingly competitive in the international market, leading to a crucial, early diversification of the country's export basket beyond traditional raw goods (Ali 1982, 95).

Despite the overall macro-economic success, the Fifth Plan suffered from critical institutional and fiscal failures that would persist throughout the decade. The targets for domestic resource mobilization, particularly the politically sensitive task of tax collection, were repeatedly missed, reinforcing a long-term **fiscal dependency** on external aid (Noman 1991, 115). Furthermore, the regime largely avoided the politically complex challenge of wholesale privatization of the vast public-sector enterprises, leaving state-owned entities to continue operating at a loss, funded by government subsidies (Khan 2013, 30). This failure to address the core issue of structural reform meant that while the economy was growing, it was not becoming fundamentally healthier or more self-sufficient, a vulnerability compounded by the neglect of critical social sectors like education, where enrollment targets were notably missed, sacrificing long-term human capital

development for short-term growth (Govt. of Pakistan 1979, 10).

THE SIXTH FIVE-YEAR PLAN: ACCELERATED DEREGULATION AND FISCAL STRAIN (1983–1988)

The Sixth Five-Year Plan (1983–1988) was designed as the high-water mark of Zia's liberalization program, moving beyond mere stabilization to institutional reform and accelerated deregulation. Building on the momentum of the Fifth Plan, the new strategy targeted a sustained average annual GDP growth of 6.5 percent, aiming for a structural overhaul that would empower the private sector as the primary engine of investment and growth (Pakistan. Planning Commission 1984, 10). This plan explicitly shifted the planning focus from direct public sector allocation to one based on utilizing incentives, institutional changes, and policy signals to guide market behavior, a philosophical shift toward classical market economics that represented a major deviation from Pakistan's post-independence planning history.

A cornerstone of the Sixth Plan was the dramatic effort to increase private sector participation, with the government projecting that private investment would increase significantly in both absolute and proportional terms compared to the previous plan (Govt. of Pakistan 1983, 15). To achieve this, a comprehensive program of deregulation was initiated: most industrial investment sanctioning requirements were abolished, price controls on several commodities were removed, and the investment approval process for intermediate and capital goods manufacturing was streamlined (Burki 1988, 1095). The aim was to foster a more dynamic, flexible, and responsive industrial sector capable of

competing globally and diversifying the manufacturing base beyond textiles into more sophisticated areas like engineering and petrochemicals, thereby maximizing value addition.

The industrial sector responded robustly to these liberalization measures, achieving a high growth rate that confirmed the effectiveness of the incentive structure, particularly in large-scale manufacturing (Hussain 1988, 45). However, the plan also began to confront the inherent structural limitations of the externally-driven growth model. While the geopolitical aid flows continued, the critical worker remittances began their predicted and gradual decline from their 1983 peak (Naqvi and Sarmad 1984, 90). This slowdown in the private foreign exchange subsidy placed immediate pressure on the balance of payments, forcing the government to manage the resulting trade deficit with greater care, often through increased external commercial borrowing, which added to the national debt.

Despite the planned move towards self-sufficiency, the reality was that the government deferred the crucial decisions on fiscal reform. The structural dependence on external aid, cemented during the Fifth Plan, proved politically difficult to undo (Siddiq 2008, 130). The political costs associated with expanding the domestic tax base, particularly into the powerful agricultural sector, were deemed too high by the regime (Gardezi 1983, 50). Consequently, even with high economic growth, the state's tax-to-GDP ratio remained stubbornly low, ensuring that the government had insufficient domestic resources to fund its rising expenditure, especially the rapidly increasing defense and debt servicing obligations, thereby institutionalizing the reliance on foreign borrowing and aid (Zaidi 2005, 125).

The Sixth Plan also attempted to address the previous plan's deficiencies in the social sector, allocating increased funds for education, health, and rural infrastructure, and explicitly recognizing that human capital was vital for sustained growth (Govt. of Pakistan 1983, 30). Physical targets, such as rural electrification and road construction, were implemented effectively, demonstrating the administrative capacity of the military government to execute tangible infrastructure projects (Burki 1988, 1098). However, the qualitative improvements in social services, particularly achieving universal primary education and enhancing the quality of public schooling, lagged significantly behind the targets (Govt. of Pakistan 1980, 5). This persistent gap highlighted the regime's ultimate prioritization of short-term economic stability and patronage over long-term, equitable human development.

The paradox of the Sixth Plan lies in its simultaneous embrace of market principles and its entrenchment of authoritarian control. While the technical rules of the market were relaxed, the final decisions on large-scale investment, resource allocation, and patronage remained highly centralized within the civilian-military bureaucracy (Rizvi 2000, 120). This allowed well-connected entities to benefit disproportionately from the liberalized environment, creating a form of crony capitalism where strategic advantage derived from political access rather than pure market competition (Khan 2013, 35). The economic benefits were therefore channeled through a system of political control, ensuring that the market itself was subordinate to the enduring power structure of the military state, a fundamental limitation on true institutional liberalization.

STRUCTURAL DEPENDENCIES, ISLAMIZATION, AND LONG-TERM INSTITUTIONAL LEGACY

The sustained high growth of the Zia decade, though impressive, was fundamentally predicated upon geopolitical rents that created profound structural dependencies. The massive influx of foreign assistance directly tied to the Soviet-Afghan war, estimated at approximately \$5 billion in US aid alone after 1982, provided the government with an unprecedented, non-debt creating revenue stream (Jaffrelot 2004, 310). This fiscal luxury allowed the regime to defer politically difficult but essential reforms, namely the expansion of the domestic tax base, and to indulge in higher non-development expenditures, particularly for military purposes, a necessary component for sustaining an authoritarian regime (Rizvi 1986, 1055). This aid-driven model made Pakistan's economic health hostage to external geopolitical events, ensuring that the prosperity was temporary and reliant on a continuing crisis in Afghanistan.

Coupled with the aid was the worker remittance boom, which acted as a powerful private-sector subsidy, stabilizing the balance of payments and fueling a consumption-led growth model. The funds provided by expatriate workers directly boosted the purchasing power of millions of families, ensuring that the benefits of high growth were widely felt across the country and contributed significantly to the reduction of absolute poverty (Spielman et al. 2016, 88). However, this private inflow, while beneficial for short-term consumption, also masked the deeper structural weaknesses of the domestic economy, particularly the persistently low domestic savings rate and the failure to channel this wealth into

productive, long-term capital formation (Naqvi and Sarmad 1984, 90). Much of the remittance capital was instead absorbed by immediate consumption and non-productive investment in real estate, failing to build a self-sustaining productive base for future decades.

The regime's policy of economic Islamization, though politically essential for its legitimacy, introduced inherent contradictions within the liberalization framework. While the intention behind the *Zakat* and *Ushr* system was to establish an institutionalized system for social justice and wealth redistribution, its execution proved to be more symbolic than transformative (Mehmood 2002, 690). The collected revenues remained fiscally insignificant relative to the national budget, and the system introduced new regulatory complexities for the financial sector without achieving its goal of profound social equity (Govt. of Pakistan 1979, 15). The true impact of Islamization was not economic efficiency but political: it served to ideologically anchor the military regime and distinguish its economic policy from previous secular administrations, prioritizing political necessity over pure economic pragmatism.

Perhaps the most damaging long-term consequence of the Zia era's high-growth period was the failure of institutional and tax reform. Despite two Five-Year Plans operating under conditions of unprecedented fiscal ease, the government consistently avoided the difficult process of broadening the tax base, especially into the wealthy, yet politically powerful, agricultural sector (Gardezi 1983, 50). This political inertia resulted in a national economy with an inherently weak fiscal core, unable to generate sufficient domestic revenue to cover its operational and debt servicing costs

(Husain 2005, 10). This low tax-to-GDP ratio ensured that the structural dependency on external aid and borrowing was institutionalized, guaranteeing that when the geopolitical rents inevitably dried up, the country would immediately plunge into a deep fiscal crisis.

The final element of the institutional legacy is the entrenchment of the military-bureaucratic patronage structure within the liberalized economy. While the official policy was deregulation, the real power of allocation and control remained centralized, shifting from direct ownership to regulatory gatekeeping (Rizvi 2000, 125). This created an environment where the most successful entities were those with the strongest political and military connections, rather than those driven purely by market efficiency (Siddiq 2008, 135). This system of controlled liberalization entrenched *rent-seeking* behavior, undermining the establishment of truly transparent, competitive markets and creating a powerful lobby invested in maintaining the existing structures of state patronage, a legacy that continues to exert a corrosive influence on Pakistan's economic governance in the democratic era.

CONCLUSION

The economic liberalization implemented by General Zia-ul-Haq was a pragmatic and contextually necessary policy reversal that successfully rescued Pakistan's economy from the brink of stagnation inherited from the nationalization era. The framework of the Fifth and Sixth Five-Year Plans utilized market incentives, guarantees to the private sector, and a strategic focus on exports, resulting in a remarkable and sustained period of high growth that visibly reduced poverty (Burki 1988, 1100). The regime deserves credit for providing the necessary administrative

stability and policy clarity required for private capital to revive its confidence, a vital step in correcting the distortions of the preceding populist period (Zaidi 2005, 135). However, this economic success was fundamentally a product of extraordinary, time-bound external subsidies—geopolitical aid and massive worker remittances—which provided an unsustainable fiscal foundation for the entire decade of growth.

The enduring paradox of this period is that the visible economic prosperity was achieved at the cost of long-term structural resilience. The ability to rely on external rents allowed the military government to sidestep the painful, but necessary, institutional reforms—most critically, the establishment of an equitable and broad domestic tax base (Hussain 1988, 50). The failure to undertake such fiscal discipline, coupled with the structural contradictions introduced by incomplete Islamization and the entrenchment of military patronage within the liberalized sphere, ensured that the high growth was ultimately fragile (Rizvi 2000, 130). When the geopolitical circumstances shifted in the late 1980s, the withdrawal of external subsidies instantly exposed the nation's profound fiscal weakness, guaranteeing the return to crippling debt and reliance on international financial institutions. Consequently, the Zia decade stands as a powerful lesson: economic liberalization, when conducted under authoritarian rule and subsidized by external rents, can deliver temporary growth and stability, but often at the expense of building the transparent, self-sufficient, and institutionally sound foundations required for true, enduring development.

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