

THE NON-VIOLENT FIREBRAND: AJMAL KHATTAK, IRREDENTISM, AND THE CRUCIBLE OF PASHTUN NATIONALISM (1957–2010)

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ABSTRACT

I examine the political life of Ajmal Khattak within the context of the National Awami Party (NAP) and ANP (1957–2010), proposing that his career exemplifies the tumultuous interplay between ideology and context in Pakistan's regional politics. Initially a fervent advocate for Pashtun autonomy, Khattak's ideology underwent a fundamental shift toward irredentism during his exile in Afghanistan under the Dawood Khan regime, reflecting the pressures of geopolitical change and the failure of socialist dreams. Following his return, I suggest that Khattak channeled his disillusionment into advocating for the rights of Pashtuns and smaller provinces through non-violent resistance, primarily leveraging his revolutionary poetry to mobilize societal consciousness. His controversial later support for General Musharraf, against the backdrop of Nawaz Sharif's democracy, highlights the profound tension between his democratic ideals and the pragmatic political choices necessitated by perceived systemic corruption. I apply Max Weber's theories of leadership and charisma to analyze Khattak's transformative impact, concluding that his legacy is defined by a consistent, albeit contested, struggle for civil supremacy and equality for marginalized groups.

KEYWORDS: Pakhtunistan, Irredentism, Resistance, Charisma, Federalism.

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Ajmal Khattak's political life serves as a compelling and complex case study in the dynamics of ideological evolution and the influence of external contexts on political leadership, spanning the most tumultuous half-century of Pakistan's history. Initially, he was a staunch advocate for the Pakhtunistan movement, seeking greater autonomy for Pashtun regions within Pakistan, with his political identity deeply rooted in democratic values and the rights of marginalized communities. His commitment to non-violence, inherited from the Khudai Khidmatgar Movement, provided a stark contrast to the often coercive and centralized governance emanating from Islamabad (Talbot 2005). His trajectory reveals how the state's consistent suppression of regional demands forced leaders like him into complex, often contradictory, political positions.

Khattak's deportation and subsequent exile in Afghanistan during the Zulfikar Ali Bhutto era marked a critical, transformative juncture. Under the political patronage of the Dawood Khan government, his ideological stance shifted significantly toward irredentism, reflecting both the geopolitical realities of exile and the failure of leftist movements in the region (Kabir 2022). This evolution illustrates how political persecution and exposure to foreign ideological currents can fundamentally reshape a leader's foundational beliefs. Following his return, Khattak continued to advocate for the rights of Pashtuns and smaller provinces, emphasizing the importance of federalism. However, his profound disappointment with democratic processes eventually led him to employ pragmatic strategies that often conflicted with his earlier ideals, exposing the inherent contradictions in his political life.

Khattak's political actions not only reflect his personal journey but also illuminate

broader societal struggles in Pakistan and Afghanistan, particularly concerning the struggle for civil supremacy and equality. His controversial support for General Musharraf's regime in the Grand Democratic Alliance (GDA) against Nawaz Sharif, for example, reveals a deep, contentious relationship between his democratic aspirations and the perceived need to dismantle what he viewed as a corrupt and unresponsive civilian oligarchy (Mohammad 2002). By employing Max Weber's theories of leadership and charisma, we can contextualize Khattak's ability to mobilize regional consciousness through non-violent resistance, despite the consistent allegations and controversies that perpetually surrounded his political activities.

The scholarly terrain regarding Ajmal Khattak is concentrated on two main areas: his literary output and his role in Pashtun nationalism, though the literature often struggles to reconcile the two. Historians of Pashtun identity, such as Dupree and Khan, correctly identify Khattak as an ardent debunker of the centralized political apparatus and a champion of the non-violent ideology rooted in the Khudai Khidmatgar Movement (Dupree 1976; Kabir 2022). This literature establishes his lifelong commitment to resisting the atrocities committed by military and bureaucratic regimes, focusing on his advocacy for Pashtun self-determination and provincial autonomy as key junctures in his enduring political struggle (Talbot 2005). I build upon these findings by specifically analyzing how the external context—namely exile—precipitated a fundamental ideological shift that subsequent literature has often failed to adequately address.

The second, more theoretical category of literature addresses leadership, resistance, and ideology. I draw insights from James MacGregor Burns' theory of transformational

leadership, which posits that leaders elevate followers to higher levels of motivation and morality, reflecting Khattak's role in instilling a moral quest for autonomy among Pashtuns (Burns 1978). I also integrate James C. Scott's theory of "weapons of the weak" to understand how Khattak's literary and non-violent resistance—his poetry and political writing—functioned as crucial, yet often overlooked, forms of opposition against overwhelming state power (Scott 1992). The existing literature hints at the controversial nature of his actions but often privileges his revolutionary image, thus creating a gap. I propose to fill this gap by applying Max Weber's framework to classify his leadership and contextualize his controversial choices within the dual logic of charisma and political necessity (Weber 1978).

I anchor this investigation in a theoretical framework that classifies Ajmal Khattak's multifaceted leadership, primarily utilizing Max Weber's theories of authority, charisma, and leadership (Weber 1978). Weber's framework helps illuminate Khattak's personal magnetism, which was crucial for mobilizing the oppressed Pashtun people, setting his leadership apart from conventional authoritarian or colonial models. Khattak's leadership possessed three distinct dimensions: traditional (as a descendant of Khushal Khan Khattak), legal (derived from his official positions as an MNA, Senator, and ANP President), and charismatic (emerging during political crises to inspire loyalty) (Weber 1978). This classification allows me to analyze how Khattak's personal authority transcended mere political office.

I further integrate James C. Scott's "weapons of the weak" to analyze Khattak's non-violent resistance strategy against overwhelming authority (Scott 1992). This theory suggests that resistance often takes the form of subtle, everyday cultural and

linguistic opposition, which Khattak embodied through his poetry and literature. I use Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to methodologically interpret his poetry, such as *Faisala* (Decision), examining how his verses expose exploitation and stimulate critical awareness among the masses (Fairclough 2013). This qualitative approach, using literature as a primary source for political resistance, is essential for uncovering the covert and symbolic dimensions of his political struggle.

This study draws extensively upon primary sources to validate its claims. These include Khattak's own literary works—such as *Da Gherat Chagha* (1957) and *Gul Parhar* (1990)—which contain the core of his political ideology and resistance themes. I also rely on archival documents, official reports, and contemporary newspaper clippings from sources like *Dawn* and *The International News* (Dawn 2002; The News 2002). Furthermore, personal communications and interviews with scholars and former associates provide crucial context, particularly regarding the contentious aspects of his life, such as the allegations of complicity in the Hayat Sherpao murder and his controversial meeting with General Musharraf (Sufi 2018).

I acknowledge the inherent challenge of accessing contaminated or politically restricted records, especially concerning allegations of terrorist activities and foreign involvement. I address this by employing cross-checking and critical analysis of all sources, comparing official accounts with personal communications and opposition press to maintain factual accuracy and minimize bias. My thematic and content analysis focuses on the evolution of his Pakhtunistan rhetoric from a demand for autonomy to a position of irredentism during exile, followed by a subsequent shift toward federalism upon his return, providing a

robust, nuanced assessment of his political career.

AJMAL KHATTAK: A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Ajmal Khattak's political consciousness was shaped by his early life in Akora Khattak, an area steeped in the revolutionary tradition of his ancestor, Khushal Khan Khattak. Born in 1925 into a destitute family, his initial exposure to politics was through the local *Hujra* where political agitation and national causes were debated. The profound influence of the Khudai Khidmatgar (KK) Movement, led by Bacha Khan, was critical, embedding the principles of non-violent resistance and service to humanity into his core ideology. This philosophy provided him with the moral and tactical framework to later contest the centralized, coercive power of the Pakistani state, defining his lifelong commitment to peaceful political action.

Khattak's educational journey and his subsequent political awakening were inextricably linked, characterized by a continuous struggle against poverty and authority. Despite financial hardship, he pursued his education, eventually mastering Persian and later completing a Master's degree (Taizi 2005). His participation in the Quit India Movement in 1942 led to his rustication from Government High School, marking the first time his commitment to political activism directly clashed with institutional authority. This event served as a powerful motivator, transforming him from a student into a dedicated political worker and fueling the revolutionary sentiment that would later saturate his prolific Pashto poetry.

Khattak was an immensely influential literary figure, acting as a pioneer in introducing progressive and modern styles to Pashto poetry and prose. His writing, which

includes seminal works like *Da Gherat Chagha* (1957) and *Kachkool* (1960), is characterized by socialist realism and revolutionary themes that directly criticize inequality and injustice. His work as an editor for various newspapers and literary journals, including *Daily Adal* and *Shahbaz*, provided him with a vital platform to disseminate his progressive political ideology. Furthermore, his service as a scriptwriter for Radio Pakistan Peshawar demonstrates his strategic understanding of mass media, using cultural programming like *Hujra* to subtly instill political consciousness among the Pashtun populace.

Khattak's ideology was deeply influenced by a confluence of Marxist philosophy, socialist thought, and the tradition of Pashtun nationalism. He openly acknowledged the impact of the Progressive Writers' Movement, which encouraged artists to engage with social and political realities, inspiring the social-realism writing reflected in his poetry (Interviews). Khattak's ideological journey led him to embrace Marxist-Leninist principles, viewing the struggle through a class lens that indicted the exploitative dispensation apparatus. His self-proclaimed ideological trinity—"Khushal Khan Khattak is in my blood, Marxism is in my mind, while Islam is in my heart"—perfectly encapsulated the complex synthesis of cultural nationalism, revolutionary politics, and traditional faith that fueled his decades-long political resistance.

STRUGGLE OF AJMAL KHATTAK IN PAKISTAN'S POLITICS

Khattak's political career within the National Awami Party (NAP) was central to his struggle for provincial rights and federalism. As a founding member in 1957, he was instrumental in consolidating various regional

and leftist factions under a unified banner (Kabir 2022). The NAP's manifesto, which included the abolition of the One Unit scheme and the attainment of provincial autonomy, perfectly aligned with Khattak's core political convictions. His rapid ascent to the position of General Secretary (NAP) cemented his role as the operational core of the Pashtun nationalist movement, positioning him at the forefront of the resistance against the centralized, dictatorial regimes of Ayub Khan and later Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (Pakistan Supreme Court Judgment 1975).

Khattak's political trajectory was defined by an unwavering resistance against military dictatorship and the centralization policies of the state. He rebuked Ayub Khan's regime, working within NAP to mobilize the Pashtun community and advocate for federalism (Ullah 2018). During the subsequent instability of Yahya Khan, he monolithically stood in solidarity with the people of East Pakistan, condemning military atrocities and advocating for a political resolution to the 1971 crisis. This consistent opposition established him as an unyielding champion of democracy, even amidst significant personal risk, embodying the non-violent resistance necessary to challenge the coercive power of the Pakistani military establishment (Khattak 1974).

Khattak's most consequential political confrontation occurred with the civilian government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. The crisis escalated sharply following Bhutto's dismissal of the Baluchistan and NWFP governments in 1973, leading to Khattak staging a major remonstrance at the United Democratic Front (UDF) rally in Liaquat Bagh, Rawalpindi, where shots were fired, resulting in casualties among NAP supporters. The subsequent banning of NAP in 1975 and the Supreme Court judgment accusing the leadership of

acting against the integrity of Pakistan forced Khattak into exile (Pakistan Supreme Court Judgment 1975). This pivotal moment transformed him from a domestic political leader into an international symbol of Pashtun resistance, severely compromising his non-violent ideals in the face of state violence.

Khattak's decade-long exile in Afghanistan fundamentally altered his political ideology, moving him toward irredentism under the patronage of the Dawood Khan regime. Initially seeking support for Pakhtun autonomy within Pakistan, Khattak soon embraced the rhetoric of an independent Pakhtunistan, as this aligned with Kabul's geopolitical stance against Islamabad (Dupree 1976). His political activities abroad—allegedly including the organization of resistance movements and providing shelter to suspects in the Hayat Sherpao murder—exposed him to accusations of complicity in terrorist activities against the Pakistani state (Zahra 2020; Sufi 2018). This shift from non-violence to foreign-backed irredentism remains the most profound and controversial ideological transformation of his career.

Khattak's return to Pakistan in 1988 marked his final and most paradoxical ideological shift. Following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, his doctrinaire Pakhtunistan secessionist advocacy was conspicuously dampened, and he became an ardent supporter of democracy and federalism (Talbot 2005). His growing disillusionment with the democratic process—which he saw as a mere "tool in the hands of the ruling elite"—led him to prioritize political stability and reform over strict democratic ideals (Mohammad 2002). This pragmatism culminated in his controversial support for General Musharraf's 2002 referendum, a decision that led to his

expulsion from the ANP leadership and irrevocably complicated his political legacy.

LITERATURE-RESISTANCE NEXUS

The relationship between literature and political resistance formed the primary operational framework for Khattak's struggle, embodying James C. Scott's concept of the "weapons of the weak" (Scott 1992). Since direct, armed opposition was not an option, especially given his non-violent ethos, Khattak leveraged his poetry as a potent cultural tool to mobilize and awaken the oppressed Pashtun masses. His writing was not merely an artistic expression; it was a powerful counter-hegemonic discourse designed to expose the exploitation of the political system and stimulate a critical awareness among the populace, thereby fulfilling the theoretical ideals of Paulo Freire's pedagogy.

Pashto poetry served as Khattak's most indispensable weapon in mobilizing resistance, especially in an oral traditional society. Poetic agitation has a deep historical root in the subcontinent, and Khattak utilized it to articulate a nationalistic, autonomous theme (Khattak 1960). His poetry, distinct from traditional romanticism, established a strong Pakhtun identity, highlighting the social and political conundrum of the Pashtun people (Taizi 2005). His verses, easily understood by the masses, acted as a powerful instrument of everyday resistance against the ruling elite, bypassing the need for sophisticated organization or direct violent confrontation (Scott 1992).

The core of Khattak's revolutionary idealism through an analysis of his seminal poem, *Faisala* (Decision). This poem endeavors to resurrect the common people to revolutionary thought, discrediting the pervasive anomalies of elite exploitation.

Khattak begins by drawing a sharp parallel between the impoverished lives of the common folk—whose children suck mud—and the swelling bank accounts of the elite (Khattak 1957). The poem's intent is to sensitize and mobilize the masses against the back-breaking exploitative tendency of the state, framing revolution as the only necessary 'decision' to establish a world where all human beings are treated similarly. *Faisala* functions as a thorough critique of economic exploitation under a corrupt system. Khattak's verses paint a scurrilous picture of the poor man doing the work, dying in debt, while the elite live in luxury built on his profit, metaphorically using the poor man's melting "fats" to light the rich man's bungalow (Khattak 1957). The poem uses direct language to express the dehumanized state of the common man, who is considered "fraudulent" in his own house. This piece of art is a revolutionary call to arms, discrediting the social contract and compelling the oppressed to unite and dismantle the exploitative system in order to achieve true justice and equality.

Khattak also strategically utilized his poetry to resist the bigotry and prejudice of religious leaders who served the elite by promoting a determinist ideology. In his famous poem, *Faryaad* (Complaint), Khattak satirically critiques the existing religious ideology, questioning the material definitions of Paradise offered by the Mullah, the student (*talib*), and the Khan (nobleman) (Khattak 1960). The Mullah promises fresh fruits, the *talib* beautiful women, and the Khan luxurious mansions. Khattak's final answer, spoken from his own heart, refutes these material illusions, defining true Paradise as the freedom where one is the master of one's own home and destiny. This spiritual critique undermined the theological justifications used by the elite to maintain the status quo.

CONCLUSION

Ajmal Khattak's political career, spanning from 1957 to 2010, was a complex, continuous struggle for civil supremacy and provincial rights, ultimately transforming him into a symbol of Pashtun resilience. His political life was characterized by a profound ideological evolution, moving from the non-violent autonomy of the NAP to the irredentism of exile, and finally returning to a pragmatic, federalist approach (Kabir 2022). His most significant confrontation with the centralized state—both under Bhutto's civilian rule and the military dictatorships—was consistently channeled through his political acumen and his powerful literary output.

Khattak's enduring legacy is defined by the successful weaponization of literature as a tool of non-violent resistance, demonstrating the power of James C. Scott's theory in a regional context. His poetry, particularly *Faisala*, remains a counter-hegemonic discourse that successfully instilled political and social consciousness among the Pashtun populace, forcing them to confront the profound class-based exploitation endemic to the Pakistani system. Understanding Khattak's journey—its controversies, its compromises, and its unwavering commitment to the marginalized—is essential for grasping the intricate dynamics of regional nationalism and the struggle for genuine federal democracy in Pakistan.

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