

# Afzal Bangash: A Life Dedicated to Militant Struggle

Feroz Ahmed

MOHAMMAD AFZAL BANGASH, president of the Pakistan Mazdoor Kisan Party and prominent politician of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), passed away in Peshawar on October 29. His death signals the end of the old generation of dedicated revolutionaries in Pakistan. Bangash was 62.

Afzal Bangash entered the political arena shortly before independence as a student participant in the anti-imperialist struggle. He was profoundly impressed by the tenacity of the Frontier Gandhi, Abdul Ghaffar Khan, with whom he had a long and close association. However, it were the strong-willed revolutionaries like Kaka Khushal Khan Khattak, Kaka Sanober Hussain Mohmand and Master Sher Ali whom he viewed as role models. Bangash joined the Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP) soon after its formation in 1948, became a member of its NWFP committee shortly afterwards. The CPP was banned in 1954. When the leftist and nationalist elements from all five provinces came together in 1957 to form the National Awami Party (NAP), Bangash was elected its General Secretary for NWFP. In the 1965 presidential elections, he was the provincial chief of Fatima Jinnah's campaign against Ayub Khan. In the NAP, he was the leader chiefly responsible for organising the peasant committee in NWFP.

When the NAP split into the Bhashani and Wali Khan factions at the end of 1967, Bangash and his colleagues in the NWFP peasant committee decided to form an independent party of the revolutionary left, which was formally launched on May 1, 1968 as the Mazdoor Kisan Party (MKP). Soon it was joined by large sections of the Bhashani NAP in Punjab and Sind.

The MKP came into national limelight in the early 1970s when, resisting the eviction of tenants, it led a mass peasant movement against landlords in NWFP. Several landlords and peasants were killed in the ensuing clashes, and Bangash's name became a spectre which haunted the propertied classes and the dilettante left alike. The MKP's influence rapidly spread to the working class movement throughout the country and to sections of the peasantry in Punjab. Even though he was recognised as the principal leader of the MKP, Bangash did not hold any official position until July 1979 when he was elected its president at the party's second congress. Immediately after this congress, Bangash left for Moscow for the treatment of his eyes.

On October 16, 1979 General Zia-ul-Haq declared the 'real' martial law and political repression was greatly intensified. Bangash was framed and convicted in the military courts on a number of serious charges, including murder. While abroad, his health continued to deteriorate, and he was afflicted with chronic bronchitis, asthma, kidney failure, stroke and near blindness, in addition to diabetes, heart disease and hyperten-

sion which he already had before leaving Pakistan. These circumstances forced him to stay in Birmingham (UK) where he had initially gone to visit his daughter.

Despite failing health, Bangash remained active abroad, mobilising opposition to the Zia dictatorship. He travelled extensively throughout western Europe, and made trips to the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Poland, the United States, Cuba, India, Afghanistan and Mongolia. In 1985, in response to the military regime's decision to legitimise itself behind the facade of a civilian government and to impose permanent hegemony of the Punjabi nationality, he, along with Attaullah Mengal, Mumtaz Ali Bhutto and Hafeez Pirzada, founded the Sindhi Baloch Pushtoon Front (SBPF) in London, demanding a confederal structure for Pakistan in order to guarantee the rights of the smaller nationalities.

However, when political activity was revived in Pakistan after the induction of the civilian front government in 1986, and many exiled politicians, including Benazir Bhutto, returned to Pakistan, Bangash also went back. But his decision was primarily motivated by his desire to breathe his last in his homeland, for he considered it his ultimate tragedy to die in Europe. Bangash was not only spared this anguish, but during the few months of life that he had in Pakistan, he was able to participate in the fateful decisions his party was engaged in making.

The MKP was divided over the question of merging with Wali Khan's National Democratic Party, successor to the NAP which was banned in 1975, and to define its links with the SBPF. Bangash went along with the decision to merge, thus ending the nearly two decade-long dispute with Wali Khan which, in the opinion of many observers, had weakened the progressive forces in NWFP and contributed to the divisiveness in the left throughout the country. The new party, the Awami National Party (ANP), pledged not to oppose the idea of confederation and agreed to allow its individual members to campaign for this idea from the platform of the SBPF. This rapprochement would not have been possible without Wali Khan having moved significantly to the left recently and Bangash having taken up the nationality question in a focused way.

Even though Bangash never pretended to be a theoretician—a remarkable quality in a country where almost every leftist leader tends to consider himself the greatest theoretician since Lenin or Mao—he had a good grasp of the fundamentals of revolutionary theory and had internalised the Marxist method of analysis. His speech to the first Punjab congress of the MKP, which dwelt upon the problematic of the intersection of class and tribe and the difference between the social origins of the agricultural labourer in Punjab and NWFP, stands out

as one of the finest in the tradition of Marxist sociology. Although he detested the idea of revolutionary theory without practice and always laid great emphasis on revolutionary militant action, he took great pains to ideologically educate his fighting cadres, including translating a book on historical materialism into Pushto.

Afzal Bangash will, probably, be remembered most for his three roles: (a) as one of the principal Pushtoon politicians, (b) as the founder and leader of the MKP, the largest and most militant party with a Marxist orientation to have emerged in Pakistan, and (c) as a co-founder of SBPF, whose manifesto may yet change the course of history of Pakistan. But during the 45 years that Bangash devoted to public life, he fought effectively on many fronts. He was one of the founders of the Pakistan Peace Committee and travelled, along with Mian Itikharuddin, Pir Manki Sharif, Tahira Mazhar Ali Khan and others, to Peking in the early 1950s as a member of the first Pakistani delegation ever to attend an international peace conference. During his years of exile, he again had the time to devote to peace committee activities, and attended the World Peace Assembly in Prague in 1983 and regional peace conferences in Warsaw and Ulan Bator.

As a trade union organiser, Bangash was founder-president of the Sarhad Trade Union Federation which, at one time, had most of the labour unions in NWFP affiliated to it. Political necessity compelled him to play the role of a journalist as well. In the early 1970s he edited the weekly *Sanober*—named after his mentor Kaka Sanober. Afzal Bangash was also one of the leading lawyers of NWFP. During Ayub Khan's rule, he was offered the judgeship of the West Pakistan high court. Declining the offer, he chose, instead, to concentrate on pleading the cases of the peasants who were being evicted by Ayub's land reforms.

Because of the firmness of his conviction, total devotion to his cause, his combative spirit, the integrity of his character, his charismatic personality, the warmth and affection towards his comrades and friends, his unique organisational and oratorical qualities and, above all, his enormous sacrifices Bangash rose to a stature in Pakistani politics which, probably, no other leftist leader has risen to. As a testament to the enormous popularity and respect that Bangash enjoyed, nearly one hundred thousand people turned up at his funeral and several hundred thousand more mourned in the villages and towns both inside and outside NWFP. The present chief minister, governor, several provincial ministers and members of the assembly, many of whom must have detested or feared his politics, came to pay their last respects to a leader who was capable of evoking both controversy and respect. With the demise of Afzal Bangash truly a giant of leftist and populist politics has departed. There will be no dearth of leftists who will continue to criticise him and others, but there is no sign yet that a leftist leader of Bangash's stature and character is about to shine on the dark horizon of Pakistan's politics.