

RIGHTS

Pakistan: Remembering Lateef Afridi, Lighthouse of the Pashtun Left

Wednesday 8 February 2023, by [TAQI Mohammad](#) (Date first published: 24 January 2023).

In the spring of 1987, I stood in the drawing room of Bilour House, Peshawar, talking to Jam Saqi. The secretary general of the Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP), Professor Jamal Naqvi, stood by. Saqi was a member of the CPP's Central Committee and an Amnesty International-designated 'Prisoner of Conscience', who had just been released after languishing in the army dictator General Ziaul Haq's prisons for over seven years.

He was talking to me in his modest Pashto, which he had picked up in jail. He asked me what I was up to. I told him that I had just written my twelfth grade exam and as soon as I get into the university, I'll join the Democratic Students Federation (DSF) and then the CPP. Just as I was finishing my sentence, a firm hand pressed on my shoulder and a familiar voice said: "Not so fast, not so fast", and broke into an even more familiar laughter. That was Comrade Abdul Lateef Afridi, the veteran Pashtun Marxist leader, whom everyone called Lala or the elder brother. I had been introduced to Lateef Lala a year or so ago through my uncle who was a junior at his law chambers, outside which a poster calling for the release of Jam Saqi was plastered prominently. That office was a mecca for Marxists, especially the Pashtuns, and Lateef Lala their patron saint.

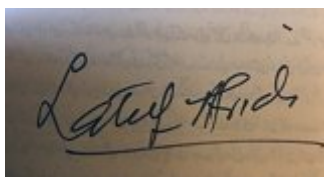
Lateef Lala was born on November 14, 1943 in the Tirah region of Khyber Agency, a former Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA). His father Hikmat Afridi was an elder of the Qambar Khel clan of the Afridi tribe. He, however, spent most of his life in Peshawar. He went to the Government High School Number 1, where he was influenced by teachers associated with the Frontier Gandhi Abdul Ghaffar Khan's Khudai Khitmatgar movement. His classmates and teachers recalled that every morning before the assembly, they would see this lanky boy "speaking with his hands" to a bunch of lads who surrounded him.

He did his bachelors in law and legislation and a masters in economics from the Peshawar University, and also cut his political teeth there during Pakistan's first martial law years. Leftist student outfits like the National Students Federation (NSF) and the DSF were active in Karachi and elsewhere in Pakistan but had not arrived on the campus in Peshawar. Lateef Lala along with other progressive students like Gul Bahadur, Qazi Anwar, Iqbal Tajik et al, pioneered the Pakistan Students Federation.

He was inspired by the Pashtun Maoist leader and lawyer Afzal Bangash, who was the provincial general secretary of the leftist National Awami Party (NAP). The opposition parties, including the majority faction of the NAP had decided to back Fatima Jinnah in the 1965 presidential elections against the dictator General Ayub Khan, and Bangash was her campaign manager in the region. Lateef Lala was expelled from the university and briefly arrested for organising protests in support of Fatima when the junta stole the elections. He was reinstated and completed his education.

His association with Bangash was both political and professional. As the international communism was getting bifurcated between Moscow and Peking, the communist and socialist parties and leaders

around the world were also picking sides in the divide. The NAP was a rainbow coalition of the Maoists like its Bengali president Maulana Abdul Hameed Bhashani aka the Red Maulana, Marxist-Leninists such as the Ghaus Bux Bizenjo, and nationalists like the party's West Pakistan president Ghaffar Khan and his son Wali Khan. The party was also a front for the leaders and cadres of the CPP, which had been banned in 1954 after Pakistan joined the US block.

A photograph of a handwritten signature in black ink on a light-colored surface. The signature is written in a cursive style and reads "Lateef Afridi".

Lateef Afridi's signature. Photo: Author provided

After the Sino-Soviet split, a group of Maoists led by CPP members Bangash, Major Mohammad Ishaq and Professor Eric Cyprian et al formally parted ways with the NAP in 1968 and formed the Mazdoor Kisan Party (MKP), which was perhaps the largest revolutionary leftist party in Pakistan's history that openly eschewed electoral politics. Following his mentor, Lateef Lala also joined the MKP and remained associated with it for several years.

He later gravitated towards and joined the underground pro-Soviet CPP, which also had in its fold other prominent Pashtun Marxists Afrasiab Khattak, Mukhtar Bacha and Sarfaraz Mahmud as well as the veteran Baloch leader Bizenjo. When Zulfikar Ali Bhutto hobnobbed with the army and judiciary to ban the NAP in 1975, he also sent nearly the entire leadership of the party as well as thousands of workers to prison. Lateef Lala successfully pleaded the cases for the workers and won them their freedom.

While the NAP leadership was still in prison, Wali Khan's wife Begum Nasim Wali Khan and an independent Baloch politician Sardar Sherbaz Khan Mazari launched formed National Democratic Party (NDP). Upon their release from prison the erstwhile NAPs nearly entire leadership, except Nawab Khair Bux Marri, joined the NDP. But the association was short-lived. Bizenjo and Sardar Attaullah Mengal quit the party, over the former's differences with Wali Khan. Lateef Lala and other Pashtun Marxists closed rank with Bizenjo, who revived one of the NAP's antecedent outfits called the Pakistan National Party.

Lateef Lala later became the provincial president of the PNP, at the height of General Ziaul Haq's brutal martial law. Starting with his first incarceration in 1979, he was imprisoned several times by the regime during that era. The political parties including Z.A. Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party, the NDP, the PNP and many others came together to form the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD). Lateef Lala became the MRD's provincial convenor when it was the PNP's turn to hold that office and organised robust protests against the junta throughout the province. He rallied political workers, trade unionists, peasants, students, doctors and, above all, lawyers to agitate against General Ziaul Haq. He was the attorney for hundreds of political workers, especially from the PPP which was really bearing the brunt of junta's brutality. He also successfully defended the communist leaders Afrasiab Khattak, Sarfaraz Mahmood, Rehmat Shah Sail and a dozen or so others in what became known as the Malakand Conspiracy Case 1979.

During the second phase of the MRD, Lateef Lala worked hard for unifying leftist and progressive nationalist parties and leaders. Finally, the MKP, a faction of the PNP, Rasool Paleejo's Awami Tehrik and the NDP came together in 1986 to form the Awami National Party (ANP). Wali Khan

became its first president while the MKP's Sardar Shaukat Ali was elected as its general secretary. Lateef Lala became the party's provincial president. When a semblance of democracy was restored after General Ziaul Haq perished in an air crash in 1988, Lateef Lala was instrumental to forge a PPP-ANP coalition government both in the NWFP (now Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa or KP) and at the center. However, when the ANP later decided to side with the rightist parties against Benazir Bhutto, Lateef Lala called its leadership out and parted ways with them.

In 1989, he and Afrasiab Khattak, who had by then returned from a self-exile in Kabul, formed the Marxist-Leninist Qaumi Inquilabi Party (QIP or the National Revolutionary Party), which was perhaps the only political outfit at the time that included the rights of self-determination and secession in its manifesto. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 dealt a near-fatal blow to the leftist politics in Pakistan and worsened the already rampant bickering among the progressives. The QIP splintered into various factions, later to reunite and rebrand as the Pashtun nationalist Pakhtunkhwa Qaumi Party. Lateef Lala later formed the National Awami Party Pakistan (NAPP) along with the poet laureate Ajmal Khattak. He and Afrasiab Khattak later returned to the ANP, from where they put up a stiff resistance against the Taliban and vociferously opposed the Pakistan army's patronage of the jihadists. The ANP top leadership came under pressure from the army establishment and tried to restrain them, and failing that ousted them from the party. In 2021, the two veteran politicians, along with the young parliamentarian and the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement leader Mohsin Dawar, formed the National Democratic Movement (NDM).

A practical human rights defender himself, Lateef Lala had fully backed the efforts by the late Justice Dorab Patel, Asma Jahangir and I.A. Rehman in the mid-1980s to form the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. He remained involved with the people-to-people peace initiatives between India and Pakistan. In 1998 he hosted some 300 delegates - half of them from India - of the Pakistan-India Peoples Forum for Peace and Democracy convention, in Peshawar and Khyber. He regularly liaised with the Afghan nationalists and Marxists in Kabul as well.

Lateef Lala's political journey spanning 60 years closely mirrors the trajectory of the leftist and Pashtun nationalist politics in Pakistan. The various mergers, breakups and reincarnations of the political parties that he remained associated with also highlights the ideological and organisational predicament of the Pakistani left since the banning of the CPP. What, however, was constant for Lateef Lala was his unwavering commitment to Marxism and progressive political thought, from which he didn't budge even an inch. He also felt that in a multi-national state like Pakistan, struggle for the rights of numerically smaller nations - called the national question in leftist parlance - and class struggle were not separable.



The author with Jam Saqi. Photo: Late Zubair Mir

The Pashtun Marxists led by Lateef Lala contributed significantly to the ANP's programme, which at its inception even used the classic Leninist jargon, such as the National Democratic Revolution being its ultimate objective. While the Pashtun nationalists like Wali Khan had vied for maximum provincial autonomy within Pakistan, it was the Marxist ideologues like Lateef Lala who really set the tone and

tenor of both the demands for national rights within Pakistan as well as fraternal ties with Afghanistan, if not an outright call for reunification of the Pashtun/Afghan irredentas. Lateef Lala and Sarfraz Mahmood had coined what became the ANP's signature slogan "Khpala Khawra, Khpal Ikhtiyar", literally meaning our land, our right to rule.

In 2010, the [18th Amendment](#) to the Constitution of Pakistan eventually codified a quantum of greater autonomy to the provinces. He was also a champion for the rights of the tribal Pashtuns who had been living in a constitutional and legal limbo since the British had imposed the FATA status on them. For decades he wrote and spoke about the plight of FATA, and when the adult franchise was granted to the tribal areas, Lateef Lala was elected to the National Assembly from his native Khyber Agency. He was one of the first political leaders to call for the merger of the FATA with the KP province and a relentless voice for repealing the draconian Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR 1901), which eventually [came to fruition in the form of the 25th Amendment](#) to the constitution in 2018.

A brilliant all-rounder attorney, who excelled in civil, criminal and constitutional matters, Lateef Lala was elected the president of Peshawar High Court Bar Association (PHCBA) at least half a dozen times and of the [Supreme Court Bar Association](#) for 2021. He didn't champion the cause of the downtrodden just verbally but really put his money where his mouth was. He pleaded tens of thousands of cases for political workers, peasants, trade unionists, students, the poor, and especially missing persons over his long legal career, and never charged even a red cent for his services. He'd even pay the court fee and expenses if the client couldn't afford that. Every evening his law chambers in the heart of Peshawar's Khyber Bazar were thronged by scores who sought his assistance or guidance, and invariably got it. The only time Lateef Lala would say no to something was when he felt that it went against his creed or the law. He had a flair for making everyone - young or old - feel special. He trained thousands of political workers, like me, and changed their lives for the better. Attention to his disciples' personal life, career and family details was his forte. He was a true mentor in every sense of the word - imparting ideological, political and life lessons.

Lateef Lala led by example and led from the front. I remember when in January 1988, Ghaffar Khan's funeral procession was crossing the Durand Line for his burial in Afghanistan, the Torkham crossing became logjammed by people and vehicles. Suddenly Lateef Lala jumped out of his vehicle and started controlling the traffic himself. At over six foot two, his imposing figure and emphatic hand gestures got the traffic flowing again. He faced off with three martial law regimes and led street protests himself. During the Lawyers' Movement against General Pervez Musharraf, he was run over by the regime's armoured personnel carrier that crushed one of his legs and he had to carry a cane after recovery. His grit was truly matchless, and I witnessed it personally.

I used to walk from my home in Peshawar city through the Lady Reading Hospital (LRH) every evening to Lateef Lala's office, which was on the other side of the hospital. One evening in perhaps 1991, I saw tremendous commotion outside the LRH's Emergency Department (ED) and double cabin pickup truck that bullet holes as if it had driven through a warzone. Upon inquiry, I was told that some Afridi had been shot. My heart sank but I ran into the ED. And there was Lateef Lala sitting upright on an examination couch with glass shards stuck in his forehead and blood running down the temple. The moment he spotted me, he smiled and said was just fine. He told me to go look for his nephew who was badly wounded. Lateef Lala was driving back from a comrade's house when his vehicle was ambushed. He had driven about two miles through Peshawar's most congested roads in an injured state and a bullet-battered vehicle to the hospital, and yet was able to smile!



L to R: Mukhtar Bacha, author, Lateef Afridi. Photo: Author provided

That attack was due to a tribal feud in which Lateef Lala's father and a brother had been killed the year before. Blood feuds and tribal vendettas have remained the bane of Pashtun life forever. In that instance, Lateef Lala's enemies were also being backed and egged on by his political opponents. Lateef Lala himself despised feuding and perpetual blood-letting, and eventually had a reproachment with his enemies. So much so that his key erstwhile enemy would seek his counsel after the reconciliation. When Lateef Lala's sub-clan was wrongly blamed for the [killing of a lawyer in 2015](#), he made every effort to assuage the aggrieved family's concerns. In fact, both Lateef Lala and the slain lawyer had represented Dr Shakil Afridi who is under arrest for helping the CIA locate Osama bin Laden.

The feud, unfortunately, carried on claiming lives on both sides. Lateef Lala, however, was not only acquitted by the courts but also confided to us friends that he had nothing to do with the killings. But just like the previous feud, the present one appears to have been stoked by powerful players. Friends and comrades advised caution to Lateef Lala. On January 16, just after he had made a hard-hitting speech against the Taliban and its state-patrons, [Lateef Lala was shot dead](#) inside the Peshawar High Court bar room. The killer, Adnan Afridi, was apprehended but his association with the Pakistan army-sponsored outfits and [Instagram pictures with the Commander XII Corps](#) and former Director General Inter-Services Public Relations, Lt. General Asif Ghafoor, have raised serious questions about his motives and backers. Regardless, 60 illustrious years of political struggle were ended with six bullets.

Lateef Lala was a lighthouse for leftists on both sides of the Durand Line. He literally coached and guided batches upon batches of political workers and rights defenders. He remained committed to the progressive cause till the last minutes of his life. He merged the Marxist philosophy with a practical political struggle. He excelled where the traditional communist ideologues of Pakistan had failed. He preached and practiced politics that had people at its centre. He was averse both to the leftists sitting on their high horse of ideology and the parochial proclivities of the ethno-nationalists. Lateef Lala was an indefatigable campaigner for the insulted and humiliated, to whom he devoted every day of his life without a break, and without fail.

*After life's fitful fever he sleeps well;
Treason has done his worst: nor steel, nor poison,
Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing,
Can touch him further.*

Rest in peace, my dear Lala!

Mohammad Taqi

P.S.

- The Wire. 24/JAN/2023:

<https://thewire.in/rights/remembering-lateef-afridi-lighthouse-of-the-pashtun-left>

- *Mohammad Taqi is a Pakistani-American columnist. He tweets [@mzdaki](#).*