

Debating “Abadi”: Population Control, Food Production, and Islamic Thought in Pakistan, 1947-71

In 1961 Ayub Khan, the President of Pakistan, worried that population growth was going to throttle his country. Alarmed, he went before the National Press Club in Washington, DC to explain that Pakistan lacked the necessary technology, like oral pills or serum injections for birth control. “We look to a country like yours,” he pleaded, “to apply your mind and your resources to help combat this problem”. Ayub’s words testify to the prominent place that population control occupied in narratives of state-led development, and to how postcolonial elites drew on global networks of expertise and resources for family planning programs. The same year Pakistan became the second country in the world, after India, to initiate an official policy on birth control. Ayub’s ideas and sense of urgency did not emerge in a vacuum; they were deeply informed by the global circulation of neo-Malthusian ideas, alarms about ticking population bombs, and faith in family planning schemes as essential to ensuring productive livelihoods, access to food and resources, and healthy households.

Why did Pakistan (including both present-day Pakistan and Bangladesh) emerge as a crucial site for global population control programs? Operating at multiple scales of analysis, my project explores the motivations for advocating family planning programs by different groups in Pakistan - these included social scientists, Islamic modernists, women social workers, and politicians and bureaucrats. It also examines the interactions between these local groups and global actors on questions of population control. I look at the implementation of both research and action-oriented family planning projects, and explore how their attempts to organize and reconfigure social and economic relations. The friction arising from these the planning and implementation of these projects provides fruitful ground for examining debates over foreign aid, modernization, the role of Islam, and state-formation in a decolonizing society.

Over the past year and a half I have conducted archival research for my project in both United States and Pakistani archives. However as my project has developed, exploring the links between food scarcity and narratives of population control has emerged as a central question. The statist push for family planning under Ayub’s regime was in large part the result of anxieties over food scarcities. Food production possessed both appeasing and explosive qualities for the Ayub’s political stability; the countryside could either rise up in revolt over scarcity and soaring prices of foodgrains, or look at the “revolutionary regime” as a savior from the food crisis.

I am requesting funding through the AIPS Short-term Research Grant for a six-week archival trip to Pakistan. In this trip I will collect materials for a chapter on food production for my dissertation. These will include the Ministry of Food and Agriculture records at the National Documentation Wing (while I have collected materials from other ministries on earlier trips, I have not fully requested and accessed the Food and Agriculture Records). I am also specifically interested in how the questions of food production and population control intersected in the public sphere. For this I propose to look at both English and Urdu language newspapers and periodicals housed at the Punjab University Library (Lahore), the National Archives (Islamabad), and the Quaid-e-Azam University Library (Islamabad), along with other local resources that I can find. Examining the centrality (and politicization) of the food question to narratives of population control for my dissertation will allow me to engage critically with historiography on development, the Cold War, and modern South Asia.