

**Standing Room Only:  
Debating Population Control, Religion, and the Family in Pakistan, 1950-71**

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.

Family planning schemes operated at different scales; some were pilot projects at the village level, while others were provincial or national in scope. However they were all transnational enterprises, and sites of interaction between local and global ideas, actors, and institutions. The Family Planning Pilot Project at Comilla (in present-day Bangladesh) for example, while administered by the Pakistan Academy for Rural Development was provided funding, training, and expertise by Michigan State University, Ford Foundation, and the Population Council. Ideas of both Pakistani and American social scientists coalesced at Comilla, and were circulated to other countries through population and rural development projects. Akhter Hameed Khan, the Director at Comilla, traveled the world consulting governments on community-led initiatives including to the Philippines and Indonesia. He also spent time at Princeton University collaborating with Arthur Lewis, a renowned development economist.

While for Akhter Hameed Khan family planning was vital for rural development and food security, others in Pakistan questioned the mandate of the state to initiative such policies. These projects became a flashpoint in debates over the nature of modernization in an Islamic republic, with “Family planning! For those who want free sex!” becoming a popular opposition slogan. Since the funding for these programs was provided by US organizations in most cases, it was also an easy target for Ayub’s political opponents. Armed with Cold War rhetoric prominent Islamists, such as Maulana Maududi, held up Ayub’s family planning schemes to criticize Pakistan’s alliance with the United States.

My History Project research looks at family planning schemes as sites where questions of development, statecraft, and the role of women and religion in postcolonial Pakistan were debated. This project expands and challenges historiography on the Global Cold War, international development, and South Asia in multiple ways. Existing diplomatic histories usually characterize Pakistan as a trusted US ally for much of the period from the early 1950s-1970s. They point towards Pakistan's signing of SEATO and CENTO, and the massive amounts of economic and military aid received to support their argument. While Cold War defense pacts might have remained stable on paper, there is little talk of how practices of development brought out divergent visions and interests. By focusing on ideational and institutional networks, along with bilateral relations, my dissertation explores new tensions and alliances that were created through population control projects. By looking both *within* and *beyond* the state, and a turn to "development politics"<sup>1</sup>, I challenge narratives of US foreign relations in South Asia which base their conclusions solely on the delivery of aid and military alliances.

My project also offers a re-reading of the Global Cold War. While security was a defining feature of the Cold War, I conceptualize it beyond missiles and defense pacts. My dissertation argues that Malthusian fears over food, resources, and the number of people, were an integral part of the United States' conception of global security. Anxieties over these forms of security produced their own battlefields: from women's bodies to agricultural fields. Threat and danger in the Cold War was hungry mouths in an overpopulated country, just as much as it was a nuclear war.

This dissertation also contributes to the historiography on development in postcolonial South Asia. Most histories of Pakistan are political, and read as an inevitable march towards military

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<sup>1</sup> I use this term based on David Engerman, "Development Politics and the Cold War", *Diplomatic History*, 41, 1 (2017): 1-19).

authoritarianism or Islamism. Using previously unexplored archives, I place Pakistan at the center of global population control projects. I argue that Pakistan was not a passive recipient of foreign exchange and ideas; rather ideas and practices of family planning were actively reconfigured and recirculated both to the global north and the global south. Since scholarship on how development projects were actually understood by their intended recipients is thin, I base a chapter of my dissertation on popular culture - including radio broadcasts, cartoons, and Urdu magazines - to explore the anxieties, questions, and hopes shared by consumers of this knowledge and practice.

The generous funding from the History Project and INET allowed me to conduct archival research in Lahore and Islamabad (Pakistan). I was able to gain access to materials at the National Document Wing, located within Pakistan's Cabinet Division. The NDW is the repository of records from different Ministries including Health, Economic Affairs, Information and Broadcasting, and Food and Agriculture. Along with these documents I also visited local libraries and offices such as the Family Planning Association (FPA) and Institute of Islamic Culture in Lahore. While there was no formal archive in these spaces, I was able to gain access to older printed materials which will help me explore the role of activists, scholars, and ordinary citizens in implementing and debating family planning schemes. The material I collected during this research trip to Pakistan will enable me to start writing my dissertation, and thinking more broadly about family planning schemes. I am grateful to the History Project's support for this dissertation project.