



Workers' Exploitation in Pakistan's Textile Industry Under Right-Wing Governance: A Marxist Historical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Pakistan's textile industry, which contributes over 60% of export earnings, employs millions while perpetuating widespread worker exploitation, particularly under right-wing governance. This study adopts a Marxist historical materialist framework to explore how regimes such as General Zia-ul-Haq's dictatorship (1977–1988), the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) (1990s, 2013–2018), and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) (2018–2022) have exacerbated labor exploitation and class conflict. Through historical review, policy analysis, and empirical synthesis, the research illustrates that right-wing policies, aligned with global capitalism, prioritize capital accumulation over labor rights, leading to low wages, unsafe conditions, and suppressed unions. The findings reveal a systemic bourgeois dominance, offering a critique of local-global dynamics and a call for proletarian empowerment.



Introduction

Pakistan's textile sector is a big deal it employs about 15 million people, making up 40% of the industrial workforce, and brings in over \$19 billion in exports each year (Pakistan Economic Survey, 2022). But behind these numbers lies a harsh reality: workers earn as little as \$80 a month, face dangerous working conditions, and have few rights (ILO, 2022). This has gotten worse under right-wing governments like Zia-ul-Haq's rule (1977–1988), the PML-N's time in power (1990s and 2013–2018), and the PTI's term (2018–2022), which have all put factory owners first and workers last (Hussain, 2019).

This study uses Karl Marx's ideas how history is shaped by economic struggles to look at this problem. It focuses on three things: (1) how labor conditions in textiles have changed over time, (2) how right-wing policies make workers' lives harder, and (3) how global business pressures mix with local decisions. Using Marx's thoughts on profit, worker misery, and class fights (Marx, 1867), it shows how these governments keep a system that benefits the rich (Shaikh, 2016). The study mixes history, policies, and data to argue that real change is needed to fix this unfair setup.

Methodology

This qualitative study combines Marxist historical materialism with three analytical approaches:

Historical Analysis: A review of the textile industry's development from colonial times to 2022, using archival data, government records (e.g., Pakistan Economic Survey, 1988), and academic works (e.g., Jalal, 1990; Zaidi, 2005).

Policy Critique: Analysis of labor and industrial policies under Zia-ul-Haq, PML-N, and PTI, sourced from legislation, economic plans (e.g., Textile Policy, 2020), and scholarly critiques (e.g., Siddiqua, 2007).

Empirical Synthesis: Compilation of secondary data on wages, conditions, and resistance from reports by ILO (2022), PILER (2019, 2022), HRW (2021), and others (e.g., Clean Clothes Campaign, 2020).

Historical Context

Colonial Roots and Changes After Independence

The textile industry in Pakistan started during British rule. Back then, Punjab grew cotton that was sent to Manchester in England to make clothes (Wolpert, 1993). The British took the cotton cheaply and didn't care about building factories or helping workers here. This made the area dependent on them. When Pakistan became independent in 1947, things began to change.

In the 1950s and 1960s, General Ayub Khan ruled and wanted Pakistan to make its own goods instead of buying from others. He built textile mills to create jobs and products (Khan, 1967). Workers earned about PKR 50 a month, which was around \$5 back then. But they had no unions or rights, and life was tough (Burki, 1980).

In the 1970s, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto took over with big ideas. He wanted fairness and took control of the mills for the government. He raised wages by 20% and let workers form unions (Bhutto, 1973; Aziz, 2015). This helped some, but not enough, because the system was messy and factory owners fought back.

Then, in 1977, General Zia-ul-Haq took power in a coup. He changed everything again. With help from the IMF and the U.S., he sold the mills to private owners and focused on selling clothes to other countries. Exports grew from \$1.2 billion in 1980 to \$2.5 billion by 1988 (Pakistan Economic Survey, 1988; Weiss, 1991). But workers didn't benefit much. Prices went up, and their pay stayed low (Rehman, 2008).

In the 1990s and later, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), led by Nawaz Sharif, kept pushing exports. During their time from 2013 to 2018, a special trade deal with Europe in 2014 helped a lot. Exports reached \$13 billion (Ministry of Commerce, 2015; Khan, 2017). Mills got better machines, but workers still struggled with low pay.

The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), under Imran Khan from 2018 to 2022, aimed even higher. They made a plan in 2020 to hit \$26 billion in exports by 2025 (Textile Policy, 2020). To do this, they kept wages low to compete with countries like Bangladesh. This showed how the industry relied on cheap labor instead of new ideas.

Looking back, the textile industry went through big shifts. It started with the British taking cotton, then moved to Pakistan making its own cloth. Bhutto tried to help workers, but Zia and others focused on money and exports. Leaders like Sharif and Khan, mostly from right-wing parties, kept this going (Akhtar, 2014). They built an industry that depends on selling cheap goods to the world, not on improving life for workers. Today, in April 2025, the industry still carries marks of its past, balancing old problems with modern demands.

This history shows a pattern: from being used by the British to being part of a global market. Each leader added their touch Ayub with mills, Bhutto with fairness, Zia with sales, and later ones with bigger goals. But the workers, the backbone of it all, often got left behind. The industry grew, but it leaned on low costs instead of lifting everyone up. That's where it stands now, tied to its roots while trying to grow in a tough world.

Theoretical Framework: Marxist Historical Materialism

Marxist historical materialism offers a lens to understand Pakistan's textile industry by focusing on how material conditions and class struggles shape history. Developed by Karl Marx (1867), this theory argues that the way people produce goods like food, clothes, or tools drives social change. At its heart is the idea that those who control production, the ruling class, exploit workers to make profits. In capitalism, this exploitation happens through "surplus value," which is the extra value workers create beyond what they're paid. Think of it as the gap between a worker's effort and their paycheck the boss keeps the difference (Harvey, 2010).

In Pakistan's textile industry, this concept is clear. Workers earn low wages, around \$80–\$100 a month, while the industry rakes in billions in exports (PILER, 2022). For example, a worker might spend hours stitching shirts that sell for high prices abroad, but they see only a tiny fraction of that money. The rest goes to factory owners and big companies. This isn't just about numbers it's about a system built to squeeze profit from labor while keeping workers poor. Marxist theory calls this the core of capitalism: paying people less than the value they produce.

Another key idea is alienation, which means workers lose connection to what they make (Lukács, 1971). In textile mills, people run machines all day, producing clothes they'll never wear or afford. They don't own the mills, the machines, or even the final product. Their job becomes a mechanical task, stripping away creativity or pride. It's like being a small cog in a big wheel important but invisible. This disconnection makes work feel meaningless, reducing workers to tools for someone else's gain.

Class conflict is the next piece. Marx saw history as a tug-of-war between the working class (proletariat) and the owning class (bourgeoisie). In Pakistan, textile workers sometimes push back

through strikes or demands for better pay but they face resistance. Right-wing governments, like those under Zia-ul-Haq or later leaders, often side with factory owners. They pass laws to weaken unions or keep wages low, making it hard for workers to fight (Gramsci, 1971). This isn't random it's the state doing its job in a capitalist system, protecting the rich and their profits.

Marx called the state a "superstructure," meaning it's built on the economic base of society (Poulantzas, 1978). In Pakistan, this shows up in policies like deregulation letting businesses do what they want or banning unions to stop workers from organizing. These moves keep the industry humming for exporters and owners, not for the people on the factory floor. For instance, when the government pushes exports to hit targets like \$26 billion by 2025, it relies on cheap labor, not better conditions. This setup locks in the power of the bourgeoisie the factory owners and elites while keeping workers down.

But Marxist theory also sees potential for change. Workers could rise up, challenge the system, and take control a revolution (Mandel, 1979). In Pakistan, though, this is tough. Unions are weak, poverty forces people to accept bad jobs, and the government cracks down on protests. The revolutionary spark Marx imagined gets smothered by these barriers. Instead, the industry rolls on, with right-wing leaders steering it to benefit the few, not the many.

Applying this framework to Pakistan's textile history ties it all together. Under British rule, cotton was taken for Manchester's mills, exploiting local farmers. After 1947, leaders like Ayub Khan built factories, but workers stayed poor. Bhutto tried to shift things with socialism, raising wages a bit, but Zia flipped it back to profit-first policies. Later governments, like PML-N and PTI, kept pushing exports, leaning on low pay to compete globally. At every step, the ruling class whether colonial powers or local elites used the state to keep control, extracting wealth from labor.

Today, in April 2025, this pattern holds. The textile industry thrives on the world stage, but workers still face the same grind: low wages, long hours, and little say. Marxist historical materialism shows how this isn't an accident it's capitalism working as designed. Right-wing governance, with its focus on markets and exports, props up the bourgeoisie while stifling any real challenge from below. Change is possible, but the system's walls are high, built to keep the status quo intact.

Results

Right-Wing Policies and Exploitation

Pakistan's political history since the late 1970s reveals a recurring pattern of right-wing regimes implementing policies that prioritize economic growth often measured through export figures and industrial output over the welfare of the working class. From General Zia-ul-Haq's military dictatorship (1977–1988) to the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) governments of the 1990s and 2013–2018, and later the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) administration (2018–2022), these regimes have consistently aligned with bourgeois interests, intensifying labor exploitation. This essay examines how these policies, rooted in deregulation, privatization, and union suppression, have systematically undermined workers' rights, suppressed wages, and neglected workplace safety, perpetuating a cycle of exploitation that benefits elites at the expense of the proletariat.

General Zia-ul-Haq's coup in 1977 marked a decisive shift away from the populist reforms of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, whose government had nationalized industries and expanded labor

protections. Zia's regime dismantled these measures, aligning Pakistan's economy with neoliberal principles under the guise of Islamization and anti communism. Ayesha Siddiqi (2007) notes that Zia banned strikes and privatized state-owned mills, signaling a retreat from state intervention in favor of market driven policies. This shift catalyzed export growth, with textiles and manufacturing benefiting from reduced labor costs and an unencumbered industrial elite. However, the human cost was stark: wages stagnated at PKR 500 (approximately \$20 in 1980s terms), as documented in the Pakistan Economic Survey (1988). Adjusted for inflation and purchasing power, this amount was barely subsistence-level, trapping workers in poverty despite rising national output.

Zia's policies reflected a broader right-wing ideology that equated economic progress with the enrichment of a capitalist class, often tied to military and industrial elites. By curbing union activity, the regime stripped workers of bargaining power, ensuring that productivity gains accrued to factory owners and exporters rather than laborers. This laid the foundation for a labor market characterized by exploitation, where profit motives trumped human dignity a legacy that subsequent governments would build upon.

The PML-N's first stint in power during the 1990s under Nawaz Sharif deepened this exploitative framework. Coming to power after Zia's death, the party embraced a pro-business agenda, offering subsidies to exporters while neglecting labor protections. The 1997 Labour Policy epitomized this approach, introducing measures that further weakened unions and restricted collective bargaining (Ahmed, 1998). Subsidies for textile magnates and industrialists boosted Pakistan's export competitiveness, but the benefits rarely trickled down. Workers faced long hours, unsafe conditions, and wages that failed to keep pace with inflation, reinforcing a system where economic growth masked growing inequality.

This period highlighted the PML-N's alignment with bourgeois interests. By prioritizing exporters often politically connected families and conglomerates the government ensured that wealth concentrated among a narrow elite. The labor force, meanwhile, remained a disposable resource, exploited to maintain Pakistan's edge in global markets. The absence of robust union representation left workers defenseless against wage suppression and workplace hazards, a vulnerability that would persist into the party's later tenure.

The PML-N's return to power from 2013 to 2018 saw a continuation of these trends, with even greater indifference to labor rights. Despite setting a minimum wage of PKR 15,000 (approximately \$90), a 2019 report by the Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research (PILER) revealed that 60% of workers earned below this threshold. Enforcement was lax, and employers particularly in the informal sector flouted regulations with impunity. The government's focus remained on export-led growth, with little investment in labor welfare or workplace safety.

The 2012 Karachi factory fire, which claimed 258 lives, stands as a grim testament to this neglect (Ali, 2013). Occurring just before the PML-N's term, the tragedy exposed systemic failures: unregistered factories, locked exits, and nonexistent safety inspections. Yet, the incoming government did little to address these issues. No significant reforms followed, and factory owners faced minimal accountability, reflecting a tacit acceptance of worker expendability. The PML-N's policies during this period reinforced a pattern of exploitation, where economic gains for the elite were subsidized by the suffering of the working class.

The PTI, led by Imran Khan, came to power in 2018 promising a break from the past. However, its economic policies mirrored those of its predecessors, prioritizing export growth over labor rights.

The 2020 Textile Policy epitomized this approach, relying on deregulation to boost competitiveness in a sector long reliant on cheap labor (Khan, 2021). Subsidies and tax breaks flowed to industrialists, while wages remained stagnant and working conditions deteriorated.

The PTI's tenure also saw active suppression of labor dissent. In 2020, union leaders were arrested during protests in Faisalabad, a textile hub, signaling the government's intolerance for collective action (HRW, 2021). That same year, a factory collapse killed 18 workers, underscoring the ongoing neglect of safety standards. Human Rights Watch (2021) documented these incidents as part of a broader continuity in policy: right-wing governments, whether military or civilian, consistently favored capital over labor. The PTI's rhetoric of economic revival masked a reality where workers bore the brunt of deregulation, with little recourse to challenge exploitation.

Across these regimes—Zia's dictatorship, the PML-N's tenures, and the PTI's rule a clear pattern emerges: right-wing policies in Pakistan have systematically served bourgeois interests. As Rashid (2020) argues, this reflects a structural alignment between political power and economic elites, often reinforced by military influence. Privatization, deregulation, and union suppression have been recurring tools, ensuring that profits accrue to industrialists and exporters while workers remain trapped in a cycle of low wages, unsafe conditions, and powerlessness.

This exploitation is not merely a byproduct of policy but its intended outcome. By keeping labor costs low, Pakistan maintains its edge in global markets, a strategy that benefits factory owners and their political patrons. The stagnation of wages whether PKR 500 in the 1980s or PKR 15,000 in the 2010s contrasts sharply with export growth, revealing a deliberate transfer of wealth upward. Tragedies like the Karachi fire and the 2020 factory collapse are not anomalies but symptoms of a system that views workers as expendable.

Empirical Evidence

Pakistan's textile industry, a vital economic pillar, lays bare the exploitation entrenched by right-wing policies since General Zia-ul-Haq's 1977 coup dismantled Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's worker-friendly reforms. Bhutto's era (1971–1977) offered a fleeting respite nationalizing industries, bolstering unions, and setting wages aiming to balance growth with equity (Aziz, 2015). Yet, Zia's regime reversed this, banning strikes, privatizing mills, and aligning the economy with bourgeois elites (Siddiqua, 2007). Wages stagnated at PKR 500 (\$20 in 1980s terms), while exports soared (Pakistan Economic Survey, 1988), marking the start of a system where labor became a cheap tool for profit. This legacy persists, as the ILO (2022) reports textile wages at \$0.50–\$0.70 hourly below Bangladesh's \$0.90 (Rahim, 2021) forcing workers to lament, "I stitch for the world but starve."

The PML-N's 1990s tenure deepened this trend, subsidizing exporters while the 1997 Labour Policy crippled unions (Ahmed, 1998). Its 2013–2018 term ignored the PKR 15,000 (\$90) minimum wage for 60% of workers (PILER, 2019), with the 2012 Karachi fire (258 deaths) exposing safety neglect (Ali, 2013). The PTI's 2018–2022 rule followed suit, with the 2020 Textile Policy pushing deregulation (Khan, 2021). Union arrests in Faisalabad and a 2020 factory collapse (18 deaths) underscored continuity (HRW, 2021). Today, PILER (2022) notes 70% of workers lack contracts, leaving them vulnerable to wage theft and hazards. UNICEF (2021) estimates 500,000 child laborers in Punjab toil in textile workshops, denied education and trapped in poverty, while 30% of workers face debt bondage, borrowing to survive on meager pay (HRW, 2021; Siddiqui, 2018).

Workplace safety remains a casualty of this neglect. The Labour Department (2022) recorded 1,200 injuries in 2021, with tragedies like the 2015 Multan collapse (45 deaths) echoing the Karachi fire (Dawn, 2015). Locked exits, unregistered factories, and lax oversight persist, as right-wing governments prioritize industrial output over lives. Zia's privatization, the PML-N's subsidies, and the PTI's deregulation share a common thread: profits for elites trump worker welfare. Rashid (2020) frames this as a structural pact between political power and capital, often military-backed, where exploitation is deliberate, not accidental.

Textile workers earn less than regional peers, yet Pakistan's export edge relies on their suffering. Bangladesh's higher wages reflect labor activism absent in Pakistan, where union suppression—rooted in Zia's era stifles resistance. Child labor and debt bondage compound this misery, with children and adults alike expendable in a system valuing output over humanity. The 2020 Textile Policy's subsidies enriched factory owners, but wages stayed flat, safety unimproved, and dissent crushed, as in Faisalabad. Bhutto's vision of empowerment, however flawed, contrasts sharply with this reality, erased by Zia and never revived.

Right-wing rule has thus entrenched a cycle where workers bear the cost of growth. The Karachi fire, Multan collapse, and daily injuries are not outliers but symptoms of a policy framework that sees labor as disposable. With 70% contractless, 500,000 children exploited, and 30% in bondage, the human toll is staggering. Breaking this requires rejecting deregulation and elite favoritism for a system valuing workers as more than cogs. Until then, Pakistan's textile labor force stitching for global markets on \$0.50 hourly remains a silent engine of bourgeois wealth, their starvation woven into every garment.

Discussion

Global Capitalism and Local Dynamics

Global capitalism, exemplified by brands like Zara, thrives on low-cost production in countries like Pakistan, enabled by right-wing trade frameworks such as the Generalized System of Preferences Plus (GSP+). This EU arrangement, detailed in a 2020 EU Report and critiqued by Fair (2019), grants Pakistan duty-free access to European markets, boosting textile exports to \$19 billion in 2022 (Pakistan Economic Survey, 2022). Yet, this economic surge bypasses workers, who endure wages of \$0.50–\$0.70 hourly (ILO, 2022), far below regional standards, with 70% lacking contracts (PILER, 2022) and 30% trapped in debt bondage (HRW, 2021). The wealth concentrates among local elites and global corporations, leaving labor exploited and impoverished.

This dynamic echoes Karl Marx's theory of imperialism, where capitalist expansion extracts surplus value from peripheral nations (Amin, 1974). Pakistan's role as a cheap labor hub for Zara and similar brands reflects a modern imperial structure, with GSP+ acting as a tool to integrate developing economies into global markets on unequal terms. Local elites, complicit in this system (Bhabha, 2022), profit as intermediaries factory owners and exporters while enforcing deregulation and union suppression, policies rooted in Zia-ul-Haq's era and perpetuated by the PML-N and PTI. The \$19 billion export boom starkly contrasts with workers' realities: child labor (500,000 in Punjab, UNICEF, 2021), workplace deaths (e.g., 2015 Multan collapse, 45 killed), and stagnant wages.

Marx's lens reveals a global bourgeoisie exploiting a local proletariat, facilitated by trade deals that prioritize profit over equity. Pakistan's elites, aligned with transnational capital, ensure this exploitation persists, mirroring historical colonial patterns. Workers stitch for the world but starve,

their labor fueling global brands while local dynamics entrench their subjugation a textbook case of capitalism's relentless reach.

Resistance and Class Struggle

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's 1969 uprising, fueled by worker unrest, secured significant gains—nationalization, wage hikes, and union empowerment lifting union membership to 15% by 1970 (Hasan, 2009). This marked a fleeting moment of labor agency, swiftly undone by General Zia-ul-Haq's 1977 coup. His crackdowns banning strikes and privatizing industries slashed unionization to a mere 2% by 2020 (ILO, 2021), crippling collective bargaining. Successive right-wing governments, notably the PML-N and PTI, entrenched this repression. The PML-N's 1997 Labour Policy and PTI's 2020 Textile Policy prioritized exports over rights, while both suppressed dissent evident in the 2023 Lahore protests, where striking workers faced arrests (The News, 2023).

This aligns with Marx's view of revolutionary potential, thwarted by repression and poverty (Thompson, 1963). Zia's legacy, perpetuated by the PML-N and PTI, ensures workers, earning \$0.50–\$0.70 hourly (ILO, 2022) and with 70% lacking contracts (PILER, 2022), remain too destitute to organize. Poverty exacerbated by 30% in debt bondage (HRW, 2021) and state violence stifle the class consciousness Marx deemed essential for change (Khan, 2016). Local elites, complicit in global capitalism's demands, crush strikes to sustain cheap labor for brands like Zara, leaving Pakistan's proletariat subdued, its revolutionary spark extinguished by decades of right-wing control.

Conclusion

Right-wing leaders in Pakistan's textile industry have built a system that keeps workers poor and powerless, fitting Karl Marx's idea of capitalism as a greedy, controlling force. Bhutto's 1969 wins for workers like stronger unions, which hit 15% membership were undone by Zia's harsh rules, dropping union membership to 2% by 2020 (ILO, 2021). Later, the PML-N and PTI kept this going, stopping strikes, like the 2023 Lahore arrests (The News, 2023), to favor rich factory owners. The facts show it: workers earn just \$0.50–\$0.70 an hour (ILO, 2022), 70% have no contracts (PILER, 2022), and exports reach \$19 billion (Pakistan Economic Survey, 2022), but workers see no gains. Big brands like Zara push this through trade deals like GSP+ (EU Report, 2020), while local bosses team up with global companies, crushing workers' chances to fight back with poverty and fear (Thompson, 1963). To fix this, Pakistan needs big changes bring back unions, enforce fair laws, and ditch profit-first policies—to give workers a real shot against years of rich rule.

Declaration of competing interest

All authors declare no conflict of interest for this work.

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