

## **Abdur Rahman and the Worker Neighbourhood of Kot Lakhpat, Lahore, 1969-1974**

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This article follows the brief rise to power of a worker-led court in Lahore, against the backdrop of the social movement that overthrew the military regime of General Ayub Khan, in the late 1960s in Pakistan. By tracing the court's emergence at that time, the paper argues that the basis of de facto sovereign power cannot be understood without looking at the historical context and the political milieu within which it emerges. Specifically, the basis of workers' power within the area of Kot Lakhpat was expressed and legitimized as a class-based identity, rooted in notions of honour linked to work, that also appropriated national symbols as its own. Therefore, the exploration of this specific context necessarily involves examining, not only why the strength of working class politics in Lahore subsequently declined, but also why workers' distanced themselves from the articulation of this particular brand of an explicitly class based, progressive identity.

This court was organized by Abdur Rahman, a local labour leader who was seen as the head of an alternative form of public order that, for a short while, came to dominate the area to the south of the city, in the area of Kot Lakhpat. In Pakistan, in the 1960s, industrial development took off across the country, but also developed particular clusters within the major cities. In Lahore, Kot Lakhpat was one of these clusters and the factory that Abdur Rehman began work in, the Batala Engineering Company (that would later be renamed the Pakistan Engineering Company or PECO), was amongst the largest in the area. However, in spite of the size of the industry and the political connections of the family that owned it, Abdur Rehman came to dictate terms, not only within the factory, but within the wider space of the worker neighbourhood. His rise to power was a result of his involvement in the anti-Ayub agitations that were taking place across the country and, as such, his politics drew on the symbols of socialism that the movement articulated, alongside the belief that this moment was one where the working classes were poised to take control, thus fulfilling their historic role. The pervasiveness of this belief fuelled the impunity with which Rehman's court was able to dispense justice and violent punishment. This narrative also challenges the general view in the literature on Pakistan that the actors and networks that have sought to supplant state authority have their power rooted solely in ethnicity, religion, or in their position as members of the propertied elite.

In 1974, Abdur Rehman was murdered under mysterious circumstances and the leader of a rival trade union was arrested. This paper will not discuss the murder in detail, but it does make use of the documents that were produced as a result. The minutes of court proceedings, rival trade unions' propaganda documents, newspaper and editorial reports are all made use of and supplemented with interviews of key participants to paint a picture of a structure of power relations that was fleeting, but that left its mark on the way the workers' of Kot Lakhpat perceived themselves for many years to come.