

Pakistan's New Middle Class

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Summary

Pakistan's middle class, like those in other parts of the world, has played a significant role in the country's politics, society and economy. Over the years, a new middle class has emerged. This new middle class seems to believe in different political values as well as subscribe to a different set of social and religious values from the old middle class. It has also been observed to participate in the economy differently from its predecessors. With that in mind, this paper attempts to make sense of this new middle class in Pakistan, understand some of its distinct characteristics and trace the historical background of the middle class from the colonial period.

Introduction

The middle class in Pakistan has historically been a powerful force in society. This has not only been seen in the years following 1947 when Pakistan gained its independence; the middle class also had played an important role in fighting for Pakistan's independence after the defeat of British India. Over the years, a "new" middle class emerged, chiefly due to the Pakistan government's policies and adoption of information technology based on the new economy. It is increasingly believed that a large section of the new middle class has different social and political values from its earlier counterparts, and it participates in the economy differently. This paper discusses the "new" Pakistani middle class – its political values, social beliefs and participation in economic activities. It also attempts to shed light on the history behind the middle class and how the old middle class may be different from the new middle class.

Defining the Middle Class

The Pakistani government does not provide an official estimate of the size and definition of the middle class. This leads to different estimations of the size and definitions of the middle class by various groups and organisations. While some, such as Adnan Adil, a reporter at *The News International* and Jawaid Abdul Ghani, a professor from the Institute of Business Administration Karachi, estimate it solely through economic means, others argue that the lifestyle one lives also needs to be considered.¹ Durr-e-Nayab, a then-lecturer in Pakistan, used reliable metrics to define the middle class in her 2011 Working Paper for the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, which will be used as the basis of this paper.

¹ Read more at Adnan Adil, "Our middle class", *The News International*, 15 June 2017, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/210660-Our-middle-class>; Jawaid Abdul Ghani, "The Emerging Middle Class in Pakistan: How it Consumes, Earns, and Saves", Institute of Business Administration Karachi KSBL Working Paper, May 2014, https://www.iba.edu.pk/testibaicm2014/parallel_sessions/ConsumerBehaviorCulture/TheEmergingMiddleClassPakistan.pdf.

Nayab used a weighted composite index, suggesting a combination of relative and absolute approaches to generate a percentage.² The suggested components are education (in which at least one person in the household has a college education), income (being twice as much away from the national poverty line), housing (ownership, persons per room and availability of water, gas and electricity), lifestyle (expenditure on consumer durables) and occupation (drifting away from manual labour).³

Based on these factors, Nayab estimated the size of the expanded middle class (which includes the upper-lower class, lower-middle class, middle-middle class and upper-middle class) to be 34.6 per cent of the population in 2011.⁴ The upper-lower class persons are those that have transitioned from having a deficit budget to a surplus and likely in a mix of manual and non-manual workforce. The lower-middle class is the “fledging” middle class which has the means to live comfortably. The middle-middle class is “hardcore” that is unlikely to fall out of the middle-class comfort while the upper-middle class is the “elite” which lives in ways closer to those of the upper classes.⁵ The numbers for the expanded middle class are likely to be even higher today, given that Pakistan’s middle class has been growing fast in recent times. In fact, between 1999 and 2018, the number of individuals which count as part of the middle class grew by an average of 16.2 per cent per year, which is above the population growth rate of approximately 2.4 per cent.⁶

Historical Role of the Middle Class in Pakistan

The Muslim middle class in colonial India was mostly made up of families employed by the British colonial government.⁷ These people were the link between the English colonial masters and the ordinary Indians in colonial India.⁸ The colonial “*salarial*”, who were wage workers primarily in white-collar employment, notably in state apparatus, were the core of the fight for the “Indianisation” of government service and “self-government” in colonial India.⁹

The Muslim nationalism that provided the agitation for a separate Pakistani state was supported by many from the Muslim *salarial*.¹⁰ Many of them subscribed to the ‘Two Nation Theory’, believing that Hindus and Muslims belong to two different nations. The theory was the backbone of the Muslim League’s demand for Pakistan. The Muslim League and a large

² Durr-e-Nayab, “Estimating the Middle Class in Pakistan,” PIDE Working Papers, Vol 77 (2011): 9.

³ Ibid., 10.

⁴ Ibid., 13.

⁵ Ibid., 12-14.

⁶ Farooq Tirmizi, “How big is the Pakistani middle class?”, *Profit Pakistan Today*, 19 September 2020, <https://profit.pakistantoday.com.pk/2020/09/19/how-big-is-the-pakistani-middle-class/>.

⁷ Ammara Maqsood, “Meet Pakistan’s Modern Middle Class”, *The New York Times*, 25 September 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/24/opinion/pakistan-modern-middle-class.html?msclkid=390ddf9dd00811ecbb5b6e8f38578087>; and Ammara Maqsood, *The New Pakistani Middle Class* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017), 6.

⁸ Maqsood, *The New Pakistani Middle Class*, 5, op. cit.

⁹ Hamza Alavi, “Politics of Ethnicity in India and Pakistan”, in Hamza Alavi and John Harriss (eds), *In Sociology of ‘Developing Societies’ South Asia* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London: Macmillan Education Ltd, 1989), 225 and 228.

¹⁰ Ibid., 229.

section of the Muslim middle class in colonial India saw Hindus as a threat to their identity in independent India and, therefore, championed for a separate state.¹¹ However, several prominent Muslim leaders were part of the Indian National Congress and were against the partition of India.

In August 1947, British India was partitioned into two – India and Pakistan. In the early days of independent Pakistan, the *salariat* occupied an important position in the state's institutions as they were responsible for building the new state. As part of the bureaucracy and given the importance of bureaucratic ties in Pakistan, the middle class utilised its bureaucratic connections to incentivise the community to work with it to build the new state, successfully mobilising broad sections of the community to be involved in its cause.¹²

Up till 1958, Pakistan was a parliamentary democracy. The business groups (which were considered part of the middle class, albeit more upper-middle class) were powerful; they were one of the contributing factors that influenced government policy, resulting in the fall of a Cabinet that they deemed unresponsive to their needs.¹³ For instance, the group contributed to then-Prime Minister Feroz Khan Noon's lifting of price controls in 1958.¹⁴

The middle class also played a role during Ayub Khan's dictatorship (1958-1969). While there was regret that democracy had collapsed in 1958, many in the middle class fell silently into line as Ayub had successfully "depoliticised Pakistani society before it slipped into the era of mass mobilisation".¹⁵ The economy grew under Ayub, but high growth rates were not distributed evenly to everyone as a category of super-rich benefitted more while the middle and lower classes gained little.¹⁶ It was then the working classes contributed significantly to the increasing pressure that led Ayub to step down in 1969.¹⁷ Segments of the middle class, such as trade unions, lawyers and teachers, supported the working class in this.¹⁸ Owing to this pressure, Ayub handed power to another military general, Yahya Khan, who enforced martial law to regain order.¹⁹ Yahya then helped facilitate a return to political order and announced general elections in 1970.²⁰

¹¹ Alavi, "Politics of Ethnicity in India and Pakistan", 239 and Ian Talbot, "Legacies of the Partition for India and Pakistan," *Politeja*, no. 59 (2019): 19.

¹² Ibid., 227.

¹³ Talukder Maniruzzaman, "Group Interests in Pakistan Politics, 1947-1958", *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 39, No. 1/2 (Spring-Summer 1966): 89.

¹⁴ Ibid., 92.

¹⁵ Ayesha Jalal, *The Struggle for Pakistan: A Muslim Homeland and Global Politics*, (London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 100.

¹⁶ S Akbar Zaidi, "Special report: The Changing of the Guard 1958-1969", *Dawn*, 2 September 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1355171>.

¹⁷ Hasan Mansoor, "Anti-Ayub movement of 1968 remembered", *Dawn*, 31 December 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1454507>.

¹⁸ Lal Khan, "Pakistan's Other Story: 6. Witness to Revolution – Veterans of the 1968-69 upheaval", *Defence of Marxism*, 22 May 2009, <https://www.marxist.com/pakistans-other-story-6.htm>.

¹⁹ Tariq Ali, *Can Pakistan Survive? The Death of a State*, (London: Penguin Books, 1983), 80; Imtiaz Omar, *Emergency Powers and the Courts in India and Pakistan*, (The Hague, Kluwer Law International, 2002), 58.

²⁰ M K Akbar, *Pakistan from Jinnah to Sharif*, (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1997), 50.

In the 1960s, the middle class was not only engaged in political movements but also raised voices for social causes. For example, the *Bhatta Mazdoor Mohaz* (Brick Kiln Workers Front), formed in 1967 by middle class student leadership, campaigned for the release of bonded brick kiln workers and their families. It later evolved to become the Bonded Labour Liberation Front, playing a prominent role in civil society despite successive attempts by the government – especially under martial law – to repress its activities.²¹ Women’s associations in Pakistan were also established and supported by the middle classes, with some providing assistance to the poor and others fighting for women’s rights.²² Hence, the middle class played a large role in ensuring a robust civil society in Pakistan through unions and associations.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s (1971-1977) credentials of egalitarianism and justice and his commitment to democratic governance garnered him support from the emerging middle class, mainly the lower-middle or middle-middle class that was influenced by global socialist movements. This group supported his progressive constitution, the building of learning institutions and the creation of basic healthcare that provided the foundations of Pakistan’s social and economic growth.²³ However, the more affluent urban middle class and elites turned against him as his populist policies made them uncomfortable, feeling that Bhutto’s support of the lower classes threatened their social standings.²⁴ The middle class was not entirely uniform – it was often divided into the lower rungs of the middle classes and the upper rungs that sought to gain from different policies, and the rule of Bhutto exemplified this.

During Zia-ul-Haq’s rule between 1979 and 1989, religion was used to legitimise the dictatorship among the middle class as he sought its support, and a large section of the middle class reciprocated. It was with this support that Zia managed to survive three attempts to unseat him from his position.²⁵ Despite his highhanded ways (such as his declaration of martial law and the introduction of Sharia law), Zia’s economic management got him support from a section of the middle class.²⁶ The Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was used as an opportunity to solidify further his rule as the United States (US) prodded Zia to support a *jihad* against the Soviets, in which a large section of the Islamised middle class joined the fight.²⁷ Pakistan’s association with the Afghan *jihad*

²¹ Alan Whaites, “The state and civil society in Pakistan”, *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol.4, no.3 (1995): 243.

²² Ibid., 244.

²³ “Political Parties: Where Do They Stand on the Issues?”, *Pakistan Forum*, Vol 1, no. 1 (October-November 1970): 6-7; Harris Khaliq, “Why Pakistan’s elite and affluent middle classes turned against Zulfikar Ali Bhutto”, *Scroll.in*, 8 April 2019, <https://scroll.in/article/918926/why-pakistans-elite-and-affluent-middle-classes-turned-against-zulfikar-ali-bhutto>.

²⁴ Nadeem F. Paracha, “Misplaced moralities”, *Dawn*, 30 October 2016, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1292915>.

²⁵ Mumtaz Ahmad, “The Crescent and the Sword: Islam, the Military, and Political Legitimacy in Pakistan, 1977-1985”, *Middle East Journal*, Vol 50, No. 3 (Summer 1996): 38; and Shahid Javed Burki, “Pakistan under Zia, 1977-1988”, *Asian Survey*, Vol 28, No. 10 (October 1988): 1090-1091.

²⁶ Burki, “Pakistan under Zia, 1977-1988”, 1089-1090, op. cit.

²⁷ Touqir Hussain, “Post-1979 Pakistan: What Went Wrong?”, in Viewpoints Special Edition: The Islamization of Pakistan, 1979-2009, *The Middle East Institute Washington D.C.* (14 July 2009): 9, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/islamization-pakistan-1979-2009>; and Nasim Ashraf, “The Islamization of Pakistan’s Education System: 1979-1989”, in Viewpoints Special Edition: The Islamization of Pakistan, 1979-2009, *The Middle*

strengthened radical religious tendencies in Pakistan and gave rise to homegrown militant groups. Some of the Islamic groups became training grounds for armed and indoctrinated youths.²⁸ These youths became a potent force in competing for “street power”, a “primordial social formation” that champions for their voices to be heard on the street, leading to a splinter within Pakistani society into sectarian, ethnic and ideological fragments that would come to dominate Pakistani civil society.²⁹

After Zia’s death in 1989, Pakistan went through a decade of democratic rule under different leaders, but none was able to stay in power for long. General Pervez Musharraf ended the revolving door of leaders with his rise in the early 2000s, which was a return to a military dictatorship that lasted for nine years. His willingness to embrace globalisation opened the country to investment and trade, increasing the size of the economy. Consequently, the size of the middle class grew under his economic reforms; many citizens could afford luxuries and joined the middle class.³⁰ However, Musharraf’s later actions, such as the suspension of the Chief Justice, would be viewed as unconstitutional by the middle class, and it mobilised itself through rallies and demonstrations to oppose him. He reacted to these demonstrations by curbing press freedom by cutting private independent channels that provided alternative coverage of the protests, angering the middle class further.³¹ The assassination of Benazir Bhutto by a suicide bomber in December 2007 also contributed to his slipping popularity, as he had been criticised for his failure to stem Islamic extremism.³² This was Musharraf’s undoing, leading to his resignation in August 2008. The increasing hunger for the rule of law led the middle class to protest his rule despite his contribution to the middle class’ economic prosperity. This new middle class that emerged mainly after Musharraf’s administration seemed to be different from the old middle class. This will be expounded upon in the next section.

New Middle Class

The new middle class is distinct from the old middle class. Its members work in mid-level positions, often in the private sector or have families making money through semi-skilled jobs in the Middle East or North America.³³ They rose mainly during Musharraf’s rule, whose economic reforms allowed many to join the middle class though his subsequent actions

East Institute Washington D.C. (14 July 2009): 25, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/islamization-pakistan-1979-2009>.

²⁸ Mohammad Qadeer, “The Evolving Structure of Civil Society and the State in Pakistan”, *The Pakistan Development Review*, Vol.36, No.4 (December 1997): 751.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ David Rohde, “Pakistani Middle Class, Beneficiary of Musharraf, Begins to Question Rule”, *The New York Times*, 25 November 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/25/world/asia/25class.html>.

³¹ Juan Cole, “Pakistan and Afghanistan: Beyond the Taliban”, *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol 124, No.2 (Summer 2009): 231.

³² Kamal Hyder, “The day Benazir Bhutto was killed”, *Aljazeera*, 27 December 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2017/12/27/the-day-benazir-bhutto-was-killed/>.

³³ Ammara Maqsood, “Love as understanding: Marriage, aspiration, and the joint family in middle-class Pakistan,” *American ethnologist*, Vol 48, No. 1 (2021): 96; Ammara Maqsood, “Meet Pakistan’s Modern Middle Class”, *The New York Times*, 25 September 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/24/opinion/pakistan-modern-middle-class.html?msclid=390ddf9dd00811ecbb5b6e8f38578087>.

disillusioned them.³⁴ In 2008, more than 50 per cent of Pakistanis lived in towns of more than 5,000 people or more – this increasing urbanisation indicates most of the middle class could be found in urban areas.³⁵

Portions of the new middle class display a more global Muslim identity that is more Arabist, with *dars* (religious study gatherings) becoming a common feature in their daily lives and their following of Arab-influenced Islam becoming a more prominent part of their Muslim identity. Moreover, there is a growing trend of religious consumption in the form of veiling fashion and Islamic banking services.³⁶ This phenomenon is in juxtaposition to the old middle class, which subscribed to a more local form of Islam and concentrated on its South Asian identity as the core of its practice of Islam.³⁷

In their engagement in civil society activities, some of the new middle-class members have been observed to be more socially conservative than those of the old middle class. For example, even as Pakistan's middle class continues to play a large role in advancing women's rights, its actions and demands are framed within a more conservative framework. The Al-Huda movement, a women's piety movement formed in the 1990s that advocates for married women to obey their husbands, are becoming more popular among middle-class women, while groups such as the Women's Action Forum – a movement launched to resist the imposition of regressive laws against women – have found themselves shrinking in Pakistan in recent years.³⁸

Even though there has been a wave of feminist demonstrations in recent times, such as the Aurat March organised by the Aurat Foundation (established by women from middle-class roots), these more "liberal" feminist demonstrations were less popular. Only about 200 to 2000 people participated in the Aurat March in each of the cities where it occurred. In Islamabad, they were even outmatched by about 400 counter-protesters from the religious parties. The low participation rates made it abundantly evident that the movement did not gain the widespread traction one might have expected from a mobilisation of the middle class.³⁹

A small segment of the middle class appears to hold a conservative view of women's rights, which seems to align with Pakistan's broader Islamic revivalism. This trend of revivalism is linked to a wider renewed interest in Islamic identity as a product of Muslim separateness from the rest of the world and emerged from the heightened search for identity among

³⁴ David Rohde, "Pakistani Middle Class, Beneficiary of Musharraf, Begins to Question Rule", *The New York Times*, 25 November 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/25/world/asia/25class.html>.

³⁵ Jason Burke, "Pakistan looks to life without the general", *The Guardian*, 17 August 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/aug/17/pakistan>.

³⁶ Maqsood, *The New Pakistani Middle Class*, 8, op. cit.

³⁷ Suroosh Irfani, "Pakistan: Reclaiming the Founding Moment", in Viewpoints Special Edition: The Islamization of Pakistan, 1979-2009, The Middle East Institute Washington D.C., (14 July 2009): 16, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/islamization-pakistan-1979-2009>.

³⁸ Alice Su, "The rising voices of women in Pakistan", *National Geographic*, 7 February 2019, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/the-rising-voices-of-women-in-pakistan>.

³⁹ "Aurat March: women rally despite bid to bar protest", *Daily Times*, 9 March 2022, <https://dailytimes.com.pk/897860/aurat-march-women-rally-despite-bid-to-bar-protest/>.

Muslims to grapple with emerging political realities.⁴⁰ Consequently, Pakistani Muslims today adopt a different brand of Islam from their predecessors. Even though the urban middle class has historically supported religious parties like *Jama'at-i-Islami*, this support came from a relatively limited group of people which was more socially conservative, such as refugees in cities as opposed to the general middle class, which may not have shared similar views.⁴¹ Hence, a section of the new Pakistani middle class seems more socially conservative. The fact that the middle class was instrumental in ending Musharraf's rule suggests that the economy, and, by extension, the prosperity of the middle class, remains its key concern.⁴² Some members of the middle class have been mobilised over the years, out of concern for their economic prosperity, to oppose government taxation, which they see as a threat to their personal economic well-being and prosperity.

This is seen in both urban and rural areas; the provincial *Aarhi* association, the *Anjuman Arthian Punjab* and the *Punjabkot MC*, among other groups, have mobilised themselves over the years to defend against taxation.⁴³ The mobilisation was most prominent in 2011, when the Federal Bureau of Revenue tweaked the Income Tax Ordinance 2001 without public consultation in order to bring agricultural produce traders, who had previously paid no taxes on incomes or turnovers, into the tax net.⁴⁴ Due to perceived threats of reduction of their prosperity, the traders banded together, announced a strike and organised many rallies to oppose state actions.⁴⁵ These traders are considered part of the middle class, and it is clear that they cared deeply about their interests and would resist any action that jeopardised their economic status.

This new middle class is also evolving as it uses social media to interact with the outside world more. It is "a global pioneer in digitally fuelled amplification of protests" and has the power to take down governments.⁴⁶ Currently, its identity is diversifying with the additional mix of freelancers and gig workers. The ease of accessing information with the rise of the internet contributed to the middle class' increased connectivity with the world through digital means. This would, therefore, continue to have an effect on the Pakistani middle class. It may lead to new developments as protests are now initiated online and can reach more people instantaneously, which is a great way to swiftly gather a large following.

As is seen in many countries, including Pakistan, there is a global consensus that the rise of new information and technologies has changed the political arena.⁴⁷ With heightened

⁴⁰ Haroon Khalid, "An Islamic revival among urban Pakistani women", *Scroll.in*, 28 January 2016, <https://scroll.in/article/802565/an-islamic-revival-among-urban-pakistani-women>.

⁴¹ Craig Baxter, "Pakistan Votes – 1970", *Asian Survey*, Vol 11, No. 3 (March 1971): 205.

⁴² David Rohde, "Pakistani Middle Class, Beneficiary of Musharraf, Begins to Question Rule", *The New York Times*, 25 November 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/25/world/asia/25class.html>.

⁴³ Asha Amirali, "A Case of Rampaging Elephants: The Politics of The Middle Classes in Small-Town Pakistan", *Journal of Contemporary Asia* (November 2022): 12.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Jawaid Bokhari, "The emerging, assertive middle class", *Dawn*, 16 May 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1689928>.

⁴⁷ Clay Shirky, "The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 1 (January/February 2011): 30; Aasim Sajjad Akhtar, "Middle class didn't bring

access to the internet and unrestricted information, the middle class, particularly the youths, are likely to receive more information and be mobilised from such online platforms that would influence their political views. This can be seen from the throngs of middle-class youths that support Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), who have been mobilised by the PTI through digital media both in the past and in the present.⁴⁸ The PTI's ability to use social media platforms, broadcast videos and initiate blog postings have led them to successfully attract the viewership of the youths and the middle class. The evolution of the new middle class, which has also included increased access to the internet, combined with the political parties' deft use of digital media, will change how political parties function in Pakistan in the long run.

Further, other factors, such as Imran's populist politics, may have a part to play in galvanising apolitical youths.⁴⁹ With their contempt for politicians of the past and their corrupt ways, the new middle class and youths threw their support behind Imran for his promises to implement large-scale political change and his stand against status quo politics.⁵⁰ The effects of this support in pushing Imran back to being the leader of Pakistan remain to be seen. Given their fervent support for Imran and his politics, the middle class is likely to have a role to play if that happens.

Conclusion

Over the course of Pakistan's history, the middle class has seen itself morphing, transiting from the old to one that now includes the new middle class. The new middle class appears to subscribe to a slightly different set of religious values and leadership compared to the old middle class. The identities and aspirations of the new middle class, along with their engagement in Pakistani civil society, may continue to change as they grow in size and influence. In the contemporary times, many in this new middle class viewed the old leaders as corrupt politicians who have damaged the country. In this regard, Imran's pledge to fight corruption and his vow to create a *Naya Pakistan* (new Pakistan) are directly responding to the imperatives of the new middle class. As a result, a sizeable portion of the middle class supports him, which could trigger political changes and restore Imran to power.

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Imran Khan to power", *Deccan Chronicle*, 11 August 2018, <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/opinion/op-ed/110818/middle-class-didnt-bring-imran-khan-to-power.html>.

⁴⁸ Mohammad Mazhari, "Youth and middle class still support Imran Khan: researcher", *Tehran Times*, 25 April 2022, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/472034/Youth-and-middle-class-still-support-Imran-Khan-researcher>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Seema Guha, "The Imran Khan Phenomena: What Explains His Massive Popularity?", *Outlook India*, 30 August 2022, <https://www.outlookindia.com/international/the-imran-khan-phenomena-what-explains-his-massive-popularity--news-219827>.