

## The Khudai Khidmatgar Movement (1933-1937)

---

Lester Kurtz  
July 2009

---

**Summary of events related to the use or impact of civil resistance**  
©2009 International Center on Nonviolent Conflict

**Disclaimer:**

Hundreds of past and present cases of nonviolent civil resistance exist. To make these cases more accessible, the [International Center on Nonviolent Conflict \(ICNC\)](#) compiled summaries of some of them between the years 2009-2011. Each summary aims to provide a clear perspective on the role that nonviolent civil resistance has played or is playing in a particular case.

The following is authored by someone who has expertise in this particular region of the world and/or expertise in the field of civil resistance. The author speaks with his/her own voice, so the conflict summary below does not necessarily reflect the views of ICNC.

**Additional ICNC Resources:**

For additional resources on civil resistance, see ICNC's Resource Library, which features resources on civil resistance in [English](#) and over [65 other languages](#).

To support scholars and educators who are designing curricula and teaching this subject, we also offer an [Academic Online Curriculum \(AOC\)](#), which is a free, extensive, and regularly updated online resource with over 40 different modules on civil resistance topics and case studies.

### **Conflict Summary:**

In 1929, the Khudai Khidmatgars (“Servants of God”) movement, led by Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, nonviolently mobilized to oppose the British in India’s Northwest Frontier Province. Ghaffar Khan and the Khudai Khidmatgar movement inspired thousands of Pashtuns (also called Pathans), who were known as fierce warriors, and others to lay down their arms and use civil resistance to challenge British rule. Although Ghaffar Khan’s initial reform efforts predated his involvement with Gandhi and the Indian National Congress (INC), he later formed a formal alliance with them and became a formidable force during and following the INC’s civil disobedience campaign of 1930-1931, helping the INC win provincial elections in 1937.

Ghaffar Khan, who is also known as Badshah Khan and the “Frontier Gandhi,” formed the world’s first nonviolent army, a force of perhaps 100,000 Pathans who took a solemn oath in joining the “Servants of God” movement, with each stating that “since God needs no service... I promise to serve humanity in the name of God. I promise to refrain from violence and from taking revenge. I promise to forgive those who oppress me or treat me with cruelty. I promise to devote at least two hours a day to social work”. (Tendulkar 1967: 59) Members of the movement were known as “Red Shirts” because of the red uniforms they wore. Initially they set to work organizing village projects and opening schools, but soon they became part of the broader Indian Independence movement, accepting without retaliation some of the most fierce British repression—mass firings on unarmed crowds, torture, personal humiliation, setting homes and fields on fire, and even the destruction of entire villages. Inspired by the dissidence of the INC and the charismatic spiritual-political leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, the Red Shirts blossomed in 1930 during the civil disobedience movement. The British responded to their mobilization by putting the Northwest Frontier Province under Martial Law from August 1930 until the following January.

Although the INC leadership stopped promoting civil disobedience in 1934, Ghaffar Khan was arrested for allegedly making a seditious and provocative speech in December of that year and was sentenced to two years imprisonment. In 1937, a new Government of India Act, which was a British response to the Independence Movement, created limited local powers and allowed for elections to a legislative body that remained ultimately under British control. The Khudai Khidmatgar movement supported the successful

To read other nonviolent conflict summaries, visit ICNC’s website:

<http://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/>

election of the INC in a new provincial government headed by Ghaffar Khan's brother, Khan Sahib, which remained in power most of the time until the creation of Pakistan in 1947. The movement achieved many of its political goals such as increased Pashtun autonomy and concessions to Pashtun identity (such as teaching Pashto in the schools), although it fell short of the complete independence (until 1947) it sought and the electoral victory channeled much of the movement's energies into a limited power-sharing arrangement with the British. Ghaffar Khan, banned from the province at the time of the election did not wish to campaign because he was concerned about the potential moral effect of political office on the movement. Major reforms at that time included the release of political prisoners, land reform, and the use of Pashto as a language of instruction in the schools. In 1947, a plebiscite resulted in the Frontier Province becoming part of the newly independent Pakistan.

Ghaffar Khan's dissatisfaction with Pakistan later led him to favor the creation of an autonomous Pakhtunistan and he was consequently imprisoned by the Pakistani government. The movement waned after its involvement in electoral politics but has become a benchmark for contemporary Muslims organizing nonviolent resistance rooted in the Islamic tradition.

### **Political History:**

The Northwest Frontier Province of British India was of great strategic importance as the overland gateway to India through the Khyber Pass. Recognizing its value to their empire, the British were tenacious in attempting to control the province, and civil resistance there was met with severe repression and multiple punitive military expeditions. Troops engaged in brutality against the Pashtun residents of the region, including those not active in the resistance, such as personal humiliations, homoerotic punishments, torture, and other acts directed at the Pashtun sense of honor. Efforts by Pashtuns to obtain independence from Britain were part of a tradition of struggle against various occupiers over the centuries. By the dawn of the twentieth century the British East India Company was completing three centuries of involvement in the region.

The Khudai Khidmatgar movement led by Ghaffar Khan was part of a complex pattern of resistance. That resistance was part of Ghaffar Khan's

To read other nonviolent conflict summaries, visit ICNC's website:

<http://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/>

family legacy: his great grandfather had been sentenced to death by the British and his grandfather and father were both part of a violent Muslim jihad against British rule. The Mujahideen attempted without success to mount an armed resistance against the Raj in the previous century but had pretty much collapsed by Ghaffar Khan's time. During much of the time in the decades just prior to independence, resistance forces were divided between the Indian National Congress, on the one hand, and the Muslim League on the other, although the latter's opposition to the British was at first quite tepid, which is what led the Khudai Khidmatgars to join with Congress instead. Ghaffar Khan sometimes operated uneasily between the two, as a devout Muslim working with the Hindu-dominated Congress in a predominantly Muslim territory.

As critic M. S. Korejo (1993) correctly observes, the Khudai Khidmatgar embraced a number of contradictions that complicated its development. Although based on a universalistic understanding of Islam and with an open membership, the movement was also founded on the unity of the Pashtuns as a distinct identity group; moreover, it was a nonviolent movement created in the wake of violent resistance to British rule with some of the same participants. Badshah Khan observed that there were two freedom movements in the region, one violent and the other nonviolent. He claimed that the violent movement preached hatred and more violence, and that the nonviolent movement preached love and brotherhood, speaking of "a new life for the Pathans," and "a great splendid revolution in art, in culture, in poetry, in their whole social life."

### **Strategic Actions:**

The Khudai Khidmatgar movement was highly organized with both democratic councils, on the one hand, and a military-like activist wing that employed a wide variety of nonviolent strategic actions in their civil resistance to British rule. When Gandhi made his first visit to the Frontier in 1938, his assessment was that the movement there was devoted not to nonviolence as a principle, but to Ghaffar Khan as a leader. Although the Khudai Khidmatgar oath emphasized nonviolence, the use of nonviolent means was a strategy rather than a creed for many involved the movement. The movement began by founding schools and creating village improvement programs (e.g., sanitation, water, and economic coops) as a way of building capacity and preparing the people for more direct action against British rule.

To read other nonviolent conflict summaries, visit ICNC's website:

<http://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/>

The British viewed the creation of schools as an act of civil disobedience and individuals involved were punished or imprisoned.

In 1930 Ghaffar Khan began mobilizing to support the INC civil disobedience campaign with public demonstrations, pickets, and the creation of a parallel movement structure with democratic civilian and hierarchical nonviolent military-style branches. The British responded with severe repression which, at great sacrifice, often resulted in increased membership for the movement. Eventually the movement was weakened by cooptation into a limited power sharing agreement until the British recognized complete independence in 1947.

Some specific strategic actions the movement engaged in are:

#### *Protest and Persuasion*

- Marches and religious processions were a mainstay of the movement's actions;
- Poetry, skits and music to represent grievances and mobilize participation in the movement;
- Symbolic clothing: the "Red Shirt" uniform worn by participants;
- Picketing of government facilities;
- Commemoration of anniversaries of repressive events such as the Kissa Khani Bazaar massacre in Peshawar (23 April 1930) when British troops killed an estimated 200 demonstrators;
- Fasting and hunger strikes to protest British occupation;
- Speeches and lectures by Ghaffar Khan, delivered at great risk and physical hardship in villages throughout the province, framing the struggle in religious terms;
- Ghaffar Khan founded a journal, *The Pakhtun*, which, even when banned by the Raj, continued to publish articles on social issues, hygiene, and Islamic law.

#### *Noncooperation*

- Boycotts of British cloth and other foreign goods, such as liquor;
- Spinning homespun cloth in solidarity with Gandhi's boycott of British cloth and efforts to construct a parallel economy;
- Refusal to pay taxes or rent to the British government;
- Noncooperation with government administration and contracted services such as mail delivery;

To read other nonviolent conflict summaries, visit ICNC's website:

<http://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/>

- Use of village councils (jirgahs) modeled after traditional tribal councils, rather than government courts to settle criminal and civil cases;
- Creation of nongovernmental schools to teach reading, writing, political awareness, cleaning, and sanitation;
- Resignations of village officials, tax collectors, and other officials of the British Raj; those refusing to do so were ostracized;
- Creation of parallel institutions and government, in effect, as with the nonviolent army;
- Training of activists for struggle with military drills and exercise, workshops on how to survive in prison;
- Resistance to traditional beliefs in purdah (female confinement in the household) by women, who were encouraged by Ghaffar Khan to engage publicly in civil resistance and uplift the community;
- Strikes and boycotts, including a spontaneous general strike following Ghaffar Khan's arrest in 1930.

#### *Nonviolent Intervention*

- Picketing and marching in public space even when forbidden to do so by British troops who frequently opened fire against unarmed demonstrators who did not turn back and confronted the troops as they continued to fire.

#### **Ensuing Events:**

Despite independence from the British Empire, resulting in the creation of a formally democratic Pakistan in 1947, the people of the region have seen little improvement in their economic status or civil liberties. Ghaffar Khan himself, although opposed to the partition of British India into India and Pakistan, swore allegiance to the new Pakistani state, but was then repeatedly jailed for civil resistance to the new nation's policies and eventually went into exile in Afghanistan.

After achieving independence, the Pakistani government, threatened by the Khudai Khidmatgar movement's calls for Pashtun autonomy, attempted to destroy what was left of it, jailing its leaders and trying to purge its memory for the country's history until recently. The tumultuous border between the two countries was temporarily opened up for his funeral, which was attended by crowds from both countries, but an explosion of bombs marred the occasion during the ceremony. The Awami National Party, of which Ghaffar Khan's son Abdul Wali Khan was the first leader, won provincial

To read other nonviolent conflict summaries, visit ICNC's website:

<http://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/>

elections in 2008 and has been attempting to restore the legacy of the Khudai Khidmatgar.

**For Further Reading:**

- Ahmad, Aijaz. "Frontier Gandhi: Reflections on Muslim Nationalism in India." *Social Scientist* 33 (Jan.-Feb., 2005): 22-39.
- Attar Chand. *India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan: a study of freedom struggle and Abdul Ghaffar Khan*. New Delhi, India: Commonwealth Publishers, 1989.
- Banerjee, Mukulika. *The Pathan unarmed: opposition & memory in the North West Frontier*. Santa Fe, N.M.: School of American Research Press, 2000.
- Bright, Jagat S. *Frontier and its Gandhi*. Lahore, Allied Indian publishers, 1944.
- Cerrina, Jean Akhtar. *Islam's peaceful warrior: Abdul Ghaffar Khan: a great leader in the nonviolent tradition of Gandhi and Martin Luther King*. Philadelphia: Xlibris, 2003.
- Cole, Juan. "[Armageddon at the Top of the World: Not! A Century of Frenzy over the North-West Frontier.](#)" Available online 28 July 2009
- Daulatzai, A. "A leap of faith: thoughts on secularistic practices and progressive politics." *International Social Science Journal* 56 (2004): 565-76.
- Easwaran, Eknath. *Nonviolent soldier of Islam: Badshah Khan, a man to match his mountains*. Afterword by Timothy Flinders. 2nd ed. Tomales, Calif.: Nilgiri Press, 1999
- Gandhi, Rajmohan. *Ghaffar Khan, nonviolent badshah of the Pakhtuns*. New Delhi; New York: Penguin Viking, 2004.
- Johansen, Robert C. "Radical Islam and Nonviolence: A Case Study of Religious Empowerment and Constraint among Pashtuns." *Journal of Peace Research* 34 (Feb., 1997): 53-71.
- Khan Abdul Ghaffar, *Khan: a centennial tribute*. New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 1995
- Khan, Abdul Ghaffar, 1890-1988. *Khudai Khidmatgar and national movement: momentous speeches of Badshah Khan*, edited by P.S. Ramu. 1992
- Khan, Abdul Ghaffar. *My life and struggle; autobiography of Badshah Khan as narrated to K. B. Narang*. [Translated by Helen H. Bouman] Foreword by Jayaprakash Narayan. Delhi, Hind Pocket Books, 1969.
- Korejo, Muhammad Soaleh. *The Frontier Gandhi, his place in history*. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1993.

To read other nonviolent conflict summaries, visit ICNC's website:

<http://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/>

- Nair, Pyarelal. *Thrown to the wolves: Abdul Ghaffar*. Calcutta, Eastlight Book House, 1966
- Pyarelal. *A pilgrimage for peace; Gandhi and Frontier Gandhi among N. W. F. Pathans*. Ahmedabad, Navajivan Pub. House, 1950.
- Radhakrishnan, N. Khan, *Abdul Ghaffar Khan: the apostle of nonviolence*. New Delhi: Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti, 1998
- Raqib, Mohammad. "The Muslim Pashtun Movement of the North-West Frontier of India – 1930-1934." Pp. 113-134 in *Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Potential*, by Gene Sharp. Boston: Extending Horizons Books, Porter Sargent Publishers, 2005.
- Tendulkar, Dinanath Gopal. *Abdul Ghaffar Khan: faith is a battle*. Bombay: Published for Gandhi Peace Foundation by Popular Prakashan, 1967
- Yunus, Mohammad, *1916- Frontier Pathans & freedom*. Foreword by Jawahar Lal Nehru, preface by Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan. Delhi: Anmol Publications, 1985.
- Yunus, Mohammad. *Frontier speaks*. 2nd ed. Bombay, Hind Kitabs, 1947.
- Zutshi, G. L., *1927- Frontier Gandhi; the fighter, the politician, the saint*. Delhi, National [Pub. House] 1970.

### **Endnotes:**

1. Estimates on the number of members of the movement vary widely, with 100,000 being a common one. Gandhi's secretary Pyarelal (1950:37) claims that in the 1930s the membership was more than that number.