The fruitless attempts of the Pakistani leaders to revive the licit opium industry, coupled with the geo-strategic changes in southwest Asia at the beginning of the 1980s, eventually helped the rise of illicit production and transit trafficking of heroin in Pakistan. For revenue purposes, Pakistan retained the century-old drug laws that facilitated the illicit production of opium poppy by Pathan cultivators. In 1975, the adoption of Islamic prohibitions by Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto produced a form of political mockery. The continuance of a similar policy by General Zia at the beginning of political instability in southwest Asia, failed to control the domestic abuse of drugs.

As a result of the so-called Saur (April) Revolution in Afghanistan and the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Pakistan became connected more than ever with the underworld drug trade. The artificial division of the subcontinent in 1947 extended Pakistan territorial disputes with Afghanistan and India. Pakistan’s security became vulnerable as a result of the Soviet presence in Afghanistan in December 1979. In an attempt to promote its security interests in southwest Asia, the US government turned a blind eye to strategic use of drug money by some army personnel in Pakistan and by bosses of the Afghan mujahedin. I argue that the US government’s Cold War strategies in Afghanistan completely ignored the threat posed by a flourishing illicit drug trade in the region. During the post-Cold War era political compromise and coalition with known traffickers, by both Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, has further polluted Pakistan’s democratic institutions.
Colonial legacies

In 1995, LaMond Tullis wrote

In 1947 Pakistan became independent and began to license opium production just as had the British. Revenue was a motivator; the British had taught their subjects well. Production and consumption expanded.¹

Tullis did not provide any explanation for his remark. The following discussion attempts to explain the influence of colonial drug policies in Pakistan during the post-independence era. With independence, Pakistan inherited an official excise system for the distribution of opium and cannabis amongst customers and addicts. Largely to earn revenue by supplying drugs to the population, the government attempted to establish its own opium industry, using a model originally developed by the colonial authorities in Bengal in 1773. Alongside the limited quantity of licit production, illegal cultivation of opium poppies continued in the politically unbridled tribal areas of NWFP and Baluchistan. The Pakistan government also lacked the political will to implement international conventions and agreements on the abuse of drugs. This obstinacy gave rise to an increase in illegal production, smuggling and consumption of drugs in Pakistan by the early 1980s.

Colonial excise policy

Instead of stamping out the use of drugs in accordance with the international regulations, Pakistani leaders during the late 1940s embraced the ‘gradual reduction’ policy of the colonial authorities for appropriating revenue from intoxicants. An official pronouncement was made at a joint conference in Lahore in April 1948, when the central and provincial/state governments expressed their determination to maintain the policies of the foregoing government for at least 15 years.

Given its financial stagnancy, the Pakistan government did not alter the major colonial narcotics laws, including the Punjab Excise Act of 1914, and its subsequent amendments in the 1920s and 1930s. Under these Acts,² the post-independence government issued some 330 licences for opium and chandu shops throughout the country.