

## Pakistan's Transition to Civilian Rule: Analysis of Zia Years

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### Abstract

*Existing literature on democratization suggests that societies once exposed to democratic liberties develop a deep spirit of resistance. This spirit of resistance is manifested in various movements for the restoration of democracies whenever democratic liberties are taken away by military dictatorships. This paper investigates this spirit of resistance during General Zia's era. It is argued here that eleven years of the military's control was challenged on different fronts by the society and finally compelling it to step back and surrender political space to the political elites. Arguments for this paper are developed by reviewing and critically analyzing the mainstream academic works produced about Zia years.*

**Key Words:** Pakistan, Democracy, Martial Law, Zia Years, Democratization, Military

### Introduction

General Zia ul Haq imposed Martial Law on July 5, 1977. This was the beginning of the second military rule in Pakistan. Challenges posed to General Zia were different from his predecessor, General Ayub Khan, in many respects. The latter was silently welcomed due to political alienation of the mass population, the infighting of the political class and failure of the political leadership to deliver during the first decade after the inception of Pakistan. The opposition parties were ill-organized and lacked popular support to challenge the Martial rule. All this allowed the military regime to not only abrogate the constitution of 1956 out rightly but also restructure the political system and reform the economy. The challenge to Ayub's control over power emerged at a later stage due to such factors as his misadventure in the 1965 War, change in an international environment, and increasing disparity; when his capitalist model of development backlashed. These developments gave leverage to his political opponents to reorganize themselves and challenge his control of power. Soon after the 1965 War with India, early cracks appeared in the regime. These tiny cracks widened up gradually with the passage of time and culminated into a series of crises. The inability of the regime to cope with these crises finally compelled the military to announce General Elections for a peaceful transfer of power. The popular resistance of two mainstream political parties, Pakistan Peoples Party and Awami League, when they failed to reconcile for a future mode of political action, resulted in the dismemberment of Pakistan and the emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign state (Khan, Ahmed, & Waheed, 2016).

General Zia's declaration of Martial Law was distastefully received by society. Political culture in Pakistan was greatly evolved due to Bhutto's five years of 'populist regime' (Sayeed, 1980) and egalitarian politics. Democratic space enjoyed by the common masses, as well as Bhutto's roots in the lower classes, became major causes of resistance against military rule from the very first day after the imposition of Martial Law.

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This resistance haunted General Zia throughout his rule of eleven years (Hussain, 1990). The struggle, on the part of General Zia, to retain his control on power, and the resistance, on the part of political activists to restore democracy, determined the nature of events during eleven years of military rule in Pakistan.

This paper is broadly divided into five sections. The first section includes a discussion on the post-coup consolidation efforts of the Zia regime. The second section explores the causes of selective co-option of the religious-political class under Zia. The third section deals with the question of rising discontent in society. The fourth section investigates the various crises and rise of resistance against the military regime. The last section analyzes the mode of transition after the plane crash incident.

## Regime Consolidation

The consolidation of authoritarian regimes in postcolonial societies like Pakistan depends not only on their ability to silence domestic opposition but also on their strategic communication with global powers to seek international support. To coercively silence his major adversary General Zia, soon after the imposition of Martial Law, ordered the arrest of Z. A. Bhutto and his prominent party companions. The regime suspended fundamental rights, banned labor and student unions, imposed media censorship and came hard on all kinds of public protest (Siddiqi, 2007, p. 84). At the international level, General Zia aligned his Regime with America and emerged as a major frontline ally for her in its proxy war in Afghanistan. The following discussion briefly sums up the strategies adopted by the Zia regime to consolidate its grip on power at domestic and international fronts.

The volatile political situation and fear of resistance compelled General Zia to pretend he was a reluctant coup maker. Unlike his predecessor General Ayub he promised to hold elections within ninety days (Yusuf, 1999, p. 175). The promise was intended at pacifying the possibilities of violent protests against the 1977 coup. This strategy of avoiding spontaneous reactions against any move of the regime by showing agreement to demands and delaying the decisions to fulfil the promises, thus, to allow sentiments to exhaust with the passage of time remained a successful tool of General Zia throughout eleven years of his rule (Hussain, 1990, p. 113). This is the reason that the critics of Zia have always termed him as a symbol of hypocrisy.

After the imposition of Martial Law, General Zia skillfully exploited the Bhutto fear factor among the business-merchant classes and feudal elites. He exaggerated Bhutto's reform agenda and his possible re-entry into the political game as a threat to feudal and business-merchant class interests. To appease the business-merchant class, he introduced limited denationalization, liberal import-export and reduction of tax policies. To avoid a possible resistance from the industrial labor and other poor segments of the society, Zia remained reluctant to full-fledged capitalist reforms. For instance, the nationalization of large scale industry was not reversed, and labor laws were kept intact. Similarly, the education and health sectors enjoyed healthy budgetary allocations. On the political front, PNA, being a major opponent of Bhutto, extended its support to military rule. It seemed evident that there was a strong realization within PNA that an election without Bhutto only could allow them an electoral victory. Such demands as 'accountability before elections' by PNA leadership served the cause of Military rule to continue for an indefinite time. Zia exploited the Bhutto's fear factor present among the ranks of PNA in his favor quite skillfully to delay elections (Waseem, 1994, p. 164).

General Zia adopted a two-pronged strategy to counter any possible resistance from a pro-Bhutto segment of society. Firstly, at the ideological level, Bhutto's slogan of socialism was countered by the slogans of *Islamization*. He built a very intimate alliance with a segment of the religious elite. The slogan of *Islamization* and alliance with the religious elite helped the regime to get support from the conservative segment of the middle class (Hussain, 1990, p. 267). Secondly, a media campaign was started, and white papers were issued, highlighting the alleged brutalities of Bhutto's government. A propaganda program on Pakistan Television was broadcasted named *Zulm ki Dastaan* (Story of Oppression) against the previous

Regime of Bhutto. There was a realization in the regime that in the presence of Bhutto, it would be impossible for the regime to consolidate and prolong its rule. Therefore, the regime decided to get rid of this problem permanently. Bhutto was charged with the murder of one of his political opponents Ahmad Raza Kasuri and ultimately hanged in one of the most controversial cases of Pakistan's judicial history. With the elimination of Bhutto, the regime banned political parties in 1979 and attained a sort of relative stability from 1979 to 1983 (Waseem, 1994, p. 365).

Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979 and Pakistan's role as a frontline state of the United States of America in the region had dual implications for Pakistan. On the one hand, it diverted the huge flow of foreign aid to Pakistan, while on the other, it helped the Military Regime to get the support of the Western bloc. Choudhry observed that the aid package announced for Pakistan by the United States was \$3.2 billion in 1979 for the period of seven years. Apart from this direct aid, the United States also helped Pakistan in getting loans from the IMF, World Bank and Asian Development Bank (Choudhury, 1988, pp. 43-45). This flow of aid and loans helped the regime to consolidate its economy.

Another important factor that helped the economy during the early years was the inflow of foreign exchange in the form of remittance. It was during the Bhutto period that the Middle East was opened for the workers from Pakistan. A huge number of laborers and skilled workers flew to the countries of the Middle East in search of better job opportunities. After settling in there, these working classes started sending back foreign exchange to their homes. The amount of remittance rose from \$577.77 million in 1976-77 to \$2885.50 million in 1982-83, contributing heavily to the foreign exchange reserves of the country (Waseem, 1994, p. 368). In addition, the successive good harvest of wheat for three years also helped the regime to control the price of wheat and earn foreign exchange as well. Mushahid identified triple 'A' factors that were responsible for the early consolidation of the Regime, Agriculture, Afghanistan and American connection (Hussain, 1990, p. 117).

Although Zia Regime tried to broaden its support base by establishing links with religious right yet, its primary constituency remained the military itself. Unlike Ayub Khan, Zia ul Haq relied heavily on its primary constituency in administering the state during the Martial Law period. Military courts were established as well as the authority of civil courts was restricted in granting bail to those who were convicted or trialed in military courts (Waseem, 1994, p. 376). Zia tried his best to attain full-fledged support of his primary constituency, i.e. the military. It was during this period when the military started penetrating in the civil sector and superior services. Serving military officials and ex-military officials were appointed as heads of a number of semi governmental and autonomous corporations. They were also inducted in District Management Services, Police and Foreign services of Pakistan. For example, in 1982, eighteen out of forty-two ambassadors working in different countries abroad came from the military (Rizvi, 1986, p. 243). Along with this, some other privileges were also given to the serving and ex-military officials like 10% quota in civilian jobs after retirement, assignments in the Middle East, allocation of agricultural land and residential and commercial plots and a remarkable increase in defense budget from 9674.5 million rupees in 1977-78 to 38,619 million rupees in 1986-87 that is 399% increase in nine years (Rizvi, 1986, p. 244). Thus, all this helped in ensuring full-fledged support from the military to General Zia.

An effort to fill the political vacuum created due to the ban on political activities at the national level was filled by introducing local bodies, for which elections were held in 1979. To appease the religious right, a *Majlis e Shura* (Consultative Assembly) was appointed by the President for running the business of the state, and it was given legal cover under the Provisional Constitutional Order of 1981, which also empowered President to be the most powerful office. Judges of all courts were asked to take new oath under PCO and unregistered political parties were declared dissolved.

## Selective Co-Option

Bhutto's reform agenda during his tenure was responsible for hurting the interests of many elite groups. Anti-Bhutto elites supported the PNA movement to sabotage the reform process during last years of Bhutto. With military takeover in 1977 PNA ensured its support to the Military Regime for the elimination of Bhutto's second chance of coming into power. Anti Bhutto interest groups also aligned themselves with the regime for the same cause. After the assassination of Bhutto, when political activities were banned by the regime, due to the demands of some of the member parties of PNA to hold elections and transfer power, the Military Regime responded by co-opting the pro-regime parties like Jamaat Islami (JI), Jamiat 'Ulma e Pakistan (JUP) and Pakistan Democratic Party (PDP), the former two representatives of religious right while the later one representative of the feudal elite, while sidelining the rest of PNA parties (Waseem, 1994, p. 357). The industrial-merchant classes and landed aristocracy who suffered from Bhutto's radical reforms developed direct links with the regime and were able to reverse some of these reforms in their favor. The shift of these interest groups from PNA to the Military Regime further added to the impotency of the PNA. Imitating Ayub, Zia tried to build an alliance with the middle farmers and urban middle classes by introducing local bodies' reforms. These local bodies' reforms were aimed to achieve two goals. First, to extend the reach of the government to the grass root level by developing direct links with the members of local bodies and secondly, to fill the vacuum created by banning the political activities at the national level by broadening the participation base.

In 1981, *Majlis e Shura* was formed under the PCO, which was composed of 350 members. Religious leaders, industrial workers, farmers, feudal elites and individuals from professional classes were picked for the membership of this assembly. Some of the politicians even left their parties to join it (Ziring, 2005, pp. 183-184). Thus, this *Majlis* served as a tool of co-opting influential individuals from various segments of society.

In 1983, when the belief had started to strengthen that it had consolidated itself to the extent that it can go ahead with the *Majlis e Shura* and its *Islamization*, for longer period of time, the Zia Regime met with the first major shock, by MRD, that shattered its confidence on its allied forces, and it was compelled to go for general elections, and seek new alliance, later on. In 1983, the intensity of mass agitation, particularly in Sind, launched under the leadership of MRD, threatened the Zia Regime. MRD demanded the lifting of Martial Law and holding of Elections (Ziring, Pakistan in the Twentieth Century: A Political History, 1997, p. 476). Although this mass protest was crushed coercively, the cracks in the regime appeared. The later developments proved that a realization might have entered in the ranks of the Regime that *Majlis e Shura* had failed to fill the vacuum created at the national level. This realization ultimately led the regime to go for a national election. In order to legitimize his position, Zia declared a referendum before holding general elections. Despite severe criticism from the opposition political parties, a presidential referendum was held in the fall of 1984. The turnout in the referendum was very low, which further intensified the realization in the regime that its existing alliance was not enough to consolidate and prolong its rule. After the referendum, the time of general elections approached. General Zia declared that the elections would be on non-party basis. MRD declared a boycott of the non-party elections. Despite MRD's boycott, general elections in 1985 were held on non-party basis. The religious right which was co-opted by the Zia Regime as an alternative to Bhutto's charisma, bitterly failed in the elections. Thus, the emergence of a new body of representatives compelled the regime to look for the co-option of new elites in order to tackle the challenge posed by MRD. After the elections, political parties were allowed to function first, and Muslim League was supported and co-opted by the regime to give an organized response to the political activities of MRD (Waseem, 1994, pp. 397-401). Mr Muhammad Khan Junejo was appointed as prime minister of the new set up with a leading role in the Muslim League. After presenting a civilianized face of the Regime, Martial Law was lifted on 30 December 1985. The newly-elected National Assembly passed the constitutional amendments legalizing all the reforms, including *Islamization* and presidential referendum (Ziring, Pakistan in the Twentieth Century: A Political History, 1997, p. 482). Muslim League, soon as a

ruling party, absorbed the two-third majority members of the National Assembly. In order to present it as the only legitimate heir of the party which created Pakistan, all other factions of the Muslim League were barred from using this name (Ziring, *Pakistan in the Twentieth Century: A Political History*, 1997, p. 483). But the honeymoon period of this new alliance was soon over. Repeated demands of lifting Martial from the Zia's own King's party and emerging differences over domestic and international issues between the President and Prime Minister led to a situation where the President lost his trust in Muslim league. The party that was co-opted to consolidate the regime started asserting its role. The resistance at social level was channelized by MRD, whereas it was also influencing the bargaining position of the PM against the President.

## Rising Discontent

After the assassination of Bhutto, when all opposition to the regime was coercively silenced, political leadership arrested, exiled or co-opted, the regime appeared to be on much stronger footings than during the volatile early two years after the imposition of Martial Law. Afghan war contributed to the consolidation of the regime in two ways. On the one hand, it was helpful in diverting the attention of the people from domestic politics, while on the other, it opened an inflow of huge financial aid to Pakistan. Despite all this, there was discontent growing over time in the society, but as the regime was ruthlessly using the coercive power of the state to crush all sort of organized opposition to it, therefore, this growing discontent failed to express itself till 1983. For the first time after the assassination of Bhutto, this growing discontent was expressed in the anti-Regime agitation movement of MRD.

When MRD declared to launch a nationwide protest against the regime on 14<sup>th</sup> of August 1983, it threatened the regime. Going with its tradition, the government decided to coercively silence the opposition. Some of the main leaders of MRD were arrested, while others went underground in order to appear on the day of agitation at Karachi. The government realizing the severity of the situation, declared a few days before the 14<sup>th</sup> of August that it was ready to restore parliamentary democracy and elections for National and Provincial Assemblies were promised on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1985. Waseem commenting on the regime's response to the agitation of MRD, argued that the government tried to pacify the expected agitation by declaring elections in 1985. But it was too little and too late. Mass agitation started throughout the country. Mass protest in rural Sind got more violent than in any other part of the country. Various government installations like banks, police stations, railway stations etc., were attacked by uncontrolled mobs. President Zia's motorcade was stoned in Sind by the mob during his visit to the province. The events were followed by the hunger strike of lawyers in Lahore and Karachi and nationwide protests. The government coercively tried to suppress the movement. The people involved in the agitations were dealt with tear gas, *lathi* charge and arrests. Prisoners were trialled in the Military courts and were given severe punishments. The merciless response of the government at last silenced the agitation in the month of December 1983 (Waseem, 1994, p. 393).

Waseem (1994), while identifying the causes of intensive and violent agitation in Sind, argued that there was a general growing sense of deprivation in Sind more than any other part of the country. Absence of any such business class that would get benefit from Zia's reforms, their poor representation in Pakistan Armed Forces and civil bureaucracy, the inflow of migrants from India first and later from the upcountry changing the demographic structure of the urban Sind, distribution of land in Sind to army officials and Punjabi farmers after the construction of Kotri and Guddu Barrages and implementation of doctrinaire Islam as against the Sufi version of Islam popularly observed in Sind, were the main cause of breeding discontent in Sind (Waseem, 1994, pp. 394-396).

Along with intense discontent in the province of Sind, dissatisfaction with the regime had taken roots all over Pakistan. One of the important sources of this dissatisfaction was the implementation of the Hudood Ordinance among the secular segments of society. Parallel to MRD, some organizations working for human

rights were also engaged in the anti-Hudood Ordinance protests. Kennedy observed that WAF and Women Lawyers Association launched anti-Hudood Ordinance protest declaring the punishments incorporated in the ordinance as brutal, unnecessary, and violation of the International Declaration of Human Rights (IDHR) (Kennedy, Charles Kennedy, "Islamization under Zia", in *Islam & Democracy in Pakistan*, ed. Muhammad Aslam Syed 1995). It was evident that the regime had been caught in a complex situation where on the one hand, it was criticized for its so-called *Islamization* drive while its close allies started criticizing it for its selective *Islamization* project and slow pace of reforms.

Ziring referred to the economic factor as another very important variable that was responsible for growing discontent in society. According to him, Pakistan's economy was a success story if seen in statistical terms, but growing number population below the poverty line, squeezing opportunities for the poor to education and disappointment towards the regime among the poor masses were creating a deep sense of deprivation and discontent (Ziring, *Pakistan: At the Crosscurrent of History*, 2005, p. 198).

The growing discontent in the society found its expression in the mass agitation of MRD, which compelled the regime to go for elections in 1985. After the elections, when a brief honeymoon period of the newly elected government passed over, a conflict emerged within the ranks of government. The differences between Prime Minister and President Benazir's return to Pakistan with the dead body of her brother Shah Nawaz Bhutto, her mass appeal and warm welcome plus departing of some of the close allies of Zia as well as a growing division within the military were the factors that in combination with the external change in International Environment pushed Pakistan to another situation of political deadlock. The following sections will discuss all these factors in the context of the growing crisis, ultimately leading to the democratic transition in 1988.

## Crisis

During the second half of the 1980s, Pakistan was entrapped in severe crises. Its involvement in the long-fought Afghan war, neglect of political participation and patronizing of religious right had encouraged militancy throughout Pakistan. Sectarian violence, bomb blasts, Kalashnikov culture and ethnic and lingual strife, had taken roots in the society. Mushahid Hussain argued that "political parties organize people on such issues that cut across ethnic or sectarian lines." Thus vacuum created by barring and penalizing political parties was filled by sectarian and ethnic politics. With the introduction of Kalashnikov culture, the struggle of these sectarian and ethnic parties had become more violent (Hussain, 1990, pp. 218-219). Whereas the whole society was passing through a stage characterized by violence and fear, a severe confrontation was carrying through within the ranks of the regime.

After the formation of Junejo's government at the center, it was expected that the Muslim League would serve as a major player to defend the MRD's onslaught against the regime. But these expectations soon met with disappointment. Junjo, after taking the leadership of the Muslim League, started asserting his role. Maya Chadda had identified the following sources of growing confrontation between the President and Prime Minister (Chadda, 2000, pp. 72-73):

1. Struggle to have greater control over the policymaking process
2. Differences over Afghan policy: Prime Minister was in favour of getting rid of the Afghan war as early as possible, while the President wanted to prolong it as well as to have such a solution to the conflict in Afghanistan, in which his supported groups of Afghan war get a dominant status. Therefore President was not in favor of the Geneva Accord while Prime Minister rushed to sign it. Alvi noted that Junejo was favored by some of the high-rank army officials who were in favour of Geneva Accord, which shows that the divisions within the core constituency of General Zia had started to appear as well. (Alvi, 1984, pp. 162-163)

3. Junejo, after taking charge of premiership started demanding for lifting of Martial Law while President wanted to prolong it. Later on Junjo's expressed aspirations to consult MRD on the issues of full-fledged transition to democracy further added fuel to the fire.
4. Junejo purged some of the close affiliates of General Zia from his government, like Finance Minister Dr. Mahbub-ul-Haq. Similarly, he removed the Information Secretary and Head of Intelligence Bureau etc.
5. On occasions, Junejo criticized General Zia for holding two offices, that of COAS and the President.
6. On April 10, 1988, a tragic incident of explosions at Ojrihi Camp occurred. Prime Minister Junejo formed an enquiry commission on it which alleged some of the army officers for the tragedy. These reports further created a gulf between the President and the Prime Minister.

At last, these differences pushed the regime into a really complex situation. On May 29, 1988, the President dissolved the National and Provincial legislatures. With the dissolution of the assemblies, the crisis of transition to democracy had become more complex. Although the President had announced that the next elections would again be on a non-party basis, yet he had very weak cards if he would opt for elections. His major allies had parted their ways with him. Law and order situation was worse while his major opponent Benazir Bhutto was the most probable winner in the next elections. A political deadlock was ahead while international pressure for earlier elections was mounting (Hussain, 1990, pp. 260-261). With the settling of the Afghan dispute between the Soviets and the United States, Zia had lost his support at the international front too. Thus the crisis had ripened for a transition, but the chances for the transition were very dim.

## **Transition to Democracy**

It was in the wake of this political deadlock that on August 17, 1988, General Zia was killed in a plane crash near Bhawalpur. The then Chairman senate Ghulam Ishaq Khan replaced him as President. The caretaker regime declared that the next elections would be held on a party basis. The military refrained itself from direct intervention, as neither the international nor domestic environment was favorable for it, and a civilian set up was established to hold elections. The office of COAS was separated from that of the President. The new COAS declared that the Army would keep itself away from politics, and it would only assure that the next elections be held peacefully (Waseem, 1994, p. 422). Emergency was declared without suspending the fundamental rights. After forty days of Zia's death, Lahore High Court gave its verdict against the dissolution of National and Provincial Assemblies on May 29, 1988, declaring it as unconstitutional. However, the court asserted that the assemblies would not be restored, and the next elections would be held on a party basis.

After the announcement of the elections date and decision of the Lahore High Court which provided for a party based election, the political forces started to realign themselves. Pakistan Peoples Party initially tried to build an electoral alliance with MRD but later decided to go all alone. The reasons for this decision were the demand for a greater number of seats from MRD as well as the PPP's confidence in its expected win. During the election campaign, the society had again got divided into pro-PPP and anti-PPP segments. Anti-PPP forces started to realign themselves. The Muslim League, after passing through early confrontation between pro-Junejo and pro-Zia factions, was again united under the banner of IJI (Islami Jamhoori Itehad). Waseem observes that the formation of IJI was the result of the fear of PPP's growing popularity. It was soon realized by anti-PPP forces that by going alone, they would not be able to defeat PPP in electoral politics. Therefore, JI, the PML, the JUI (Darkhwasti), The NPP, the Markaz e Jamiat e Ahal Hadith, the Jama't al-Mushaikh, the Hizb e Jihad and Fakhar Imam's Azad Group entered into an electoral alliance under the umbrella cover of IJI in order to confront PPP in elections. (Waseem, 1994, p. 424)

The election was held on 16, November, 1988. The turnout in the elections was 40%. The PPP won 92 National Assembly seats as compared to 54 seats of IJI. The PPP emerged as the largest party in the center and majority party in Sind, despite its winning seats in almost all provinces. The major shock to the party was in Punjab, where IJI had appeared as the largest party (Waseem, 1994, p. 429).

After the elections, President Ghulam Ishaq Khan nominated Benazir Bhutto as Prime Minister, being the leader of the largest party in the National Assembly. The emergency was lifted, and the Emergency Council was dissolved. With Benazir Bhutto's ascend to the office of Prime Minister, the second democratic transition was completed. Despite this democratic transition, democracy was not allowed to consolidate during the next decade.

## **Conclusion**

Pakistan is a classic example of hybrid regimes. This hybridism has never allowed it to develop into a consolidated democracy. Despite authoritarian reversals, little episodic democratic experiences had greatly contributed to the evolution of political culture in Pakistan. It is evident that resistance against military rule under General Zia was channelized by MRD at the political front and by various civil society organizations at the social front. Thus, the pressure built at the domestic level was reconciled with changing international political scenario, leading to a transition to civilian rule in 1988. Although people enjoyed their right to voting-in a government four times within a short span of time, yet they were not allowed to vote out a government a single time. The eighth constitutional amendment was used thrice to premature dissolution of assemblies. Indirect involvement of the military through secret agencies remained a constant feature of this period (Gul, 2011). This ten year of civilian rule was once again reversed in October, 1999, with the military coup of General Musharraf.

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