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Muhammad Ali Shaikh*

Stephen John†

Ann Samson‡

Pale Dawn of Democracy: Post Ziaul Haq political developments and 1988 Elections in Pakistan

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Headings

- [Introduction](#)
- [Objectives](#)
- [Research Questions](#)
- [Methodology](#)
- [Discussions and Results](#)
- [The Immediate Aftermath](#)
- [Road to Election](#)
- [Conclusion](#)
- [References](#)

Abstract *The death of Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff and President, General Ziaul Haq, with several senior army officers in a plane crash in August 1988 ushered Pakistan in utter chaos and uncertainty. Though his successors in power positions ruled in favor of democracy, the elections were heavily influenced to in favor of pro-establishment parties and against PPP and its leader Benazir Bhutto. The policies adopted and actions taken by the holders of Constitutional offices and prime state institutions subjected the country to political fragmentation. The present study takes stock of the political developments taking place from the death of General Ziaul Haq till the formation of the new political governments in the Center and provinces in December 1988.*

Key Words: Elections 1988, Benazir Bhutto, Ziaul Haq, democracy, Pakistan.

Introduction

Pakistan faced an unprecedented upheaval in August 1988 when the country lost its top leadership in a plane crash. President General Ziaul Haq accompanied by Pakistan army's senior officers, including the Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee (CJCS), General Akhtar Abdur Rahman, fell victims in this crash. The US ambassador to Pakistan Arnold Raphel and US defense attaché, Brigadier General Herbert M. Wasssom were also on that unfortunate flight, which fell at a desolate place called Tamewali, between Multan and Bahawalpur. "They had been invited to observe the tank trials of the latest American battle tanks, the M1/A1 Abrams [\(Nawaz 2008\)](#)".

General Ziaul Haq held two most important positions vested in his person: The Chief of the Army Staff (COAS) and the President of Pakistan, in that order. After packing up the government of Prime Minister Mohammad Khan Junejo in May 1988, he had assumed the powers of the prime minister as well. "After sacking the Junejo government, General Zia had formed a cabinet without a prime minister" [\(Arif 1995\)](#), assuming, in essence, the role of the prime minister as well. The death of the person occupying three offices of the state created a sudden vacuum in the polity of Pakistan. This propelled Pakistan towards the uncharted waters where a host of momentous political developments took place that set the direction of the country for next decade or so and bred political instability.

* Ex Vice Chancellor, Sindh Madressatul Islam University, Karachi, Sindh, Pakistan.

†Associate Professor, Department of Education, Sindh Madressatul Islam University, Karachi, Sindh, Pakistan.

Email: stephen_blessed@yahoo.com

‡ Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Federal Urdu University of Arts, Science and Technology, Karachi, Sindh, Pakistan.

Objectives

The objective of this study was to trace the political developments taking place in the country during one of the most turbulent periods of its history, after the death of General Ziaul Haq in the incident of a plane which was crashed in the month of August 1988 to formation of federal and provincial governments in December 1988. It also reviews the policies adopted by various Constitutional offices and the state institutions which sowed the seeds of instability in Pakistan for over a decade.

Research Questions

In order to carry out the present study, the following set of research questions was formulated:

1. What political situation emerged immediately after the death of General Ziaul Haq and thirty-five senior army officers in a plane crash in August 1988?
2. What were the policies adopted by the state institutions following the sudden death of the President and chief of army staff?
3. What measures were adopted to influence the elections of November 1988 in favor of the pro-establishment parties, including the formation of IJI?
4. What was the outcome of such policies on the formation of new political governments in December 1988?

Methodology

In view of the nature and scope of this study, the qualitative research methodology was considered to be best suited. As the subject relates to history, the present researcher employed the archival and historical research tools as well as conducted the focused interviews. There is plenty of published literature on the subject, including biographies of some of the persons who were either participants or keen observers of the events taking place during the period of subject study. Wherever possible, open-ended interviews with the relevant persons were conducted, including Benazir Bhutto, who was one of the main political players during that phase of the political history of the country. In addition to them, data was also culled from the contemporary sources of information like the news-stories and interviews appearing in various newspapers and periodicals about the subject. In this regard, the library of Daily Dawn Karachi was extensively consulted for the present study. In the final phase, the data obtained through various sources, as highlighted above, was subjected to a criterion sampling technique and was correlated with other sources of information.

Discussions and Results

For the sake of clarity and to draw the results objectively, the discussion was divided into four parts: (a) The immediate aftermath, (b) Road to elections, (c) Elections 1988, and (d) Post-election manoeuvrings.

The Immediate Aftermath

Pakistan was not institutionally prepared to sustain such a big shock where its topmost leader occupying three most important power positions ceased to exist in the plane crash. This also exposed the extreme divisions in Pakistani society. The demise of all-powerful General Ziaul Haq brought the inherent divisions of Pakistani society to the fore. On the one hand, his supporters grieved his passing and arranged that his remains be laid to rest in the compound of the soaring and majestic King Faisal Mosque in Islamabad. However, the opponent of Zia was very happy on his death in a crash of plane" (Ziring 1997). The high command of the army debated the possible action plans to cope with the extraordinary situation. One suggestion was to impose martial law in the country. However, the majority suggested following the constitutional path (Arif 1995).

In accordance with the Constitution of the country, whenever the President of the country is unable to discharge his duties, the Chairman of the Senate of Pakistan assumes the acting charge of the office of the president. "If the seat of President of Pakistan becomes vacant because of his/her death or resignation or maybe removal from the post, then chairman senate will function as president of Pakistan, and if the chairman senate is not able to perform the duty of the president, then speaker of National Assembly will perform the duties of president" reads the Section 49 (1) of the Constitution [\(Constitution of Pakistan 2015\)](#).

Accordingly, Ghulam Ishaq Khan, who was serving as Chairman of Senate at this critical juncture of the history, was ushered into the office of the acting President. However, the most important position held by General Ziaul Haq was that of the Chief of the Army Staff. In that position, he was succeeded by General Mirza Aslam Beg who was serving as Deputy Chief of Army Staff under the late General's dispensation. He was saved from the fatal crash as he had decided to fly in his separate jet instead of joining General Ziaul Haq in his aircraft on a fateful day. Another important position of the chief of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) was occupied by Lt. Gen. Hamid Gul. Rest of the civilian set up in the federal as well as provinces was left as it was notified by the late General [\(Dawn, news item 1988\)](#).

Prior to his death, General Ziaul Haq had announced the holding of elections in November 1988 on non-party basis. He had dismissed the government of Prime Minister Mohammad Khan Junejo and dissolved the assemblies in May 1988, and as per Constitution, the next elections should have taken place in maximum three months' time, i.e. August 1988. But he pushed the elections by two months till November. "Later, it transpired that postponement was due to the news of Benazir's pregnancy: Zia's men had announced the new dates on the basis that Benazir was due to deliver the baby sometime in November" [\(Zakria 1989\)](#).

The post-Zia military and political setup, nicknamed as 'establishment' decided to hold elections as planned earlier, i.e. 16 November 1988 as there was immense domestic as well as international pressure to hold elections on time, on non-party basis. "The law was deliberately designed in such way with the purpose not only to keep PPP out of election but also to give recognition to the nominees of Zia recognition" [\(Bhutto 2007\)](#).

Road to Election

From the very beginning, the die was cast against those opposed to General Zia. On top of the list of disliked leaders by the establishment was Benazir Bhutto and her PPP as were immense fears and misgivings associated with her in those circles. Heraldo Munoz, who later headed the UN Commission to investigate the murder of Benazir Bhutto in 2007, later wrote that she used to be hated as well as feared by many in the country, "particularly by the so-called 'Establishment'", which in his words comprised "sections within the army and security services, certain businessmen, and Islamist extremists" [\(Munoz 2014\)](#).

As already mentioned, the caretaker governments in the federation as well as the provinces were already notified by the late General and were stuffed with the persons loyal to him. The irony was that the caretakers were themselves contesting the elections, with undue advantages afforded to them due to their official positions. This caretaker setup, coupled with the condition of contesting the elections on non-party basis were the sources of contention for the neutral political fraternity in the country. Air Martial Asghar Khan, who was one of the prominent political leaders with a highly acclaimed background in the armed forces raised both these issues with President Ghulam Ishaq Khan in his meeting with him on 5 September [\(M. A. Khan 2009\)](#).

In his letter dated 12 September, Asghar Khan wrote to the President: "I brought to your attention two issues which in my opinion are fundamental to the creation of an atmosphere conducive for stability and progress in Pakistan. The first is holding of party-based elections with the allocation of party symbols

and the second the early removal of the present interim governments in the Center and the Provinces. . . I also explained that with the majority of the electorate being illiterate, party symbols would obviate the confusion that would otherwise result. I suggested that clear party affiliations would also prevent floor crossing by those elected, giving greater political stability to the system” [\(M. A. Khan 2009\)](#).

However, there was no action on the part of the President or the establishment to address any of the two concerns. The caretaker chief ministers and the central ministers were openly using the official resources in promoting their candidature in the elections. One such occasion was a public meeting organized at Mochi Gate Lahore on 6 September, where state resources were extensively used by the caretaker chief minister Nawaz Sharif. In his letter to President, Asghar Khan wrote: “the events since our meeting on 5th September have shown that possibility in the present circumstances, of free and fair polls, appear remote and everything suggests that the Provincial administrations will use all means, fair and foul, to obtain a verdict in their favour. . . . Government funds and resources were freely used for making this public meeting a success” [\(Khan, 2009\)](#).

One concern of the political leadership of the country relating to holding the elections on the non-party basis was addressed by the Supreme Court on the petition filed by Benazir Bhutto on 2 October 1988. The Supreme Court in their verdict ordered that the elections be held on the party basis, declaring that every “political party shall be eligible to take part in the national and provincial assemblies’ elections and shall be entitled to the allotment of an election symbol by Election Commission” [_\(Dawn 1988\)](#).

While this verdict was widely welcomed by the independent political leadership of the country, it was a blow to the pro-establishment parties as it was widely believed that in the party-based elections, it would be very difficult to contain Benazir Bhutto’s Pakistan People’s Party. This led to the move to amalgamate all the pre-political parties under one banner so that the chances of the split vote amongst those forces could be minimized. Within four days of the verdict of the Supreme Court, on 6 October, the state agencies were able to assemble all the sympathetic parties under one electoral alliance, the Islami Jhamoori Itehad (IJI) to confront the PPP in a one-to-collective fight [_\(Shaikh 2000\)](#).

Writing on the formation of IJI, Shuja Nawaz in his well-researched book on the history of Pakistan Army observed that after realizing the prospects of Benazir Bhutto and her party to power as a result of free and fair elections, the then senior leadership of the army in league with the country’s premier intelligence agency, the ISI , which was under the command of Lt. Gen. Hamid Gul, decided to strengthen the Bhutto rivals, particularly the Muslim League in the province of Punjab, which is the largest as well as economically advanced, was a key player in Pakistani politics. Shuja reported in his book that there were reports according to which the ISI chief himself went to Lahore to help form an alliance under the title of the Islami Jhamoori Itehad, to extend his authorities Zia chose a young politician from Punjab Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif” [\(Nawaz, 2008\)](#).

With this, the political field in the country was clearly divided between two political forces: the PPP and the collective vote bank of all the parties, who chose to become part of the IJI. Furthermore, the IJI had clear support of the establishment. One of the leading lights of IJI, Professor Ghafoor Ahmed of Jamiat Islami later wrote in his book that the establishment’s support for IJI was to such an extent that the Chief of Army Staff, General Aslam Beg, held a meeting with IJI leaders including him over dinner at COAS’s official residence in Rawalpindi on 24th October. He wrote that ISI Chief was also there in that meeting, the purpose of which was to political review the situations. The IJI leaders who attended this meeting included, the IJI chief Ghulam Mustafa Jatoi, Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif, General Fazale Haq, Zafarullah Jamali, Akhtar Ali G. Kazi and others [_\(Ahmed 1995\)](#).

Subsequently, there were two more follow-up meetings held at the behest of the ISI Chief, General Hamid Gul, where the leading lights of IJI participated. The participants of these meetings used to discuss the political situation as well as took decisions to shore up the IJI’s prospectus of winning elections. [\(Ahmed 1995\)](#). The tilt of the establishment in favour of the IJI was obvious in several other ways, including the

coverage given to the alliance on the state-controlled electronic media, which completely ignore the other parties. This aspect was highlighted by Asghar Khan in his letter to the President stating that the IJI organized “event was given extensive publicity on radio and TV. You are no doubt aware that public meetings of other political parties are given no coverage on TV or radio” (Khan, 2009).

The Elections 1988

The elections for the National Assembly were held peacefully on the appointed day. In the final count, PPP won the elections emerging in the National Assembly as single largest party. It won 93 seats while IJI got 54 seats. Amongst the nine parties of the alliance, the Muslim League bagged the largest chunk. The alliance’s poor performance was attributed to its policy of identifying it with the General Ziaul Haq and its confinement to Punjab as against Benazir Bhutto’s PPP’s “identification with Bhutto, and its long struggle against the Zia regime” [_\(Mahmood 2002\)_](#).

Despite PPP’s home being Sindh, it was the only party which was leading other parties in winning seats at the provincial and federal level in Pakistan. The ration of the seat of PPP with IJI/MQM in four provinces was in Punjab 52:44, Sindh 31/13, NWFP 8 while in Baluchistan only one seat was won by PPP. Benazir Bhutto herself contested elections from four seats and was declared elected from all of them. The PPP victory was astonishing despite “the establishment and the caretaker government’s hostility towards my party and me” [_\(Bhutto 1999\)_](#).

The election to provincial assemblies was held three days after the election for the National Assembly. In view of the victory of PPP in the National Assembly elections, the IJI under the patronage of caretaker chief minister of Punjab, Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif, introduced the slogans based on provincialism to win more seats in the provincial assembly. The slogan reverberated throughout the province by the IJI leaders during the intervening period was: “*Jag Punjabi Jag, Teri Pug noon Lag Gaya Dagh*” (Wake up Punjabis, wake up! Your honour has been daunted). In the public meetings, it was implied that PPP was a Sindhi party that cannot be trusted. This propaganda worked in the province where in contrast to the results of National Assembly, IJI secured majority 108 seats as against 94 of PPP in a house of 240. This paved the way for Nawaz Sharif to be the chief minister of the biggest and most important province of the country [_\(Shaikh 2000\)_](#).

These measures were in addition to allegations of massive rigging in favor of pro-establishment parties. It was widely believed that the scope of PPP’s victory had narrowed down through massive manipulation on the part of the state agencies. One keen observer of Pakistani politics of that time, M. Ziauddin, later wrote in Dawn: “In 1988 when part-based elections were announced, then PPP was in a position to get more than 37% votes in the whole country, but elections were rigged by the establishment, the purpose was not to let PPP get the government”. [_\(Ziauddin 2000\)_](#).

Post-Election Maneuverings

The efforts to keep PPP away from power did not come to an end after the elections were over. In a parliamentary system of ‘first-past-the-post’, has emerged as the largest single party in the National Assembly, PPP was supposed to be invited to form the government. However, that did not happen. On the contrary, the leading lights of the caretaker governments started issuing statements that it was the President’s prerogative to invite ‘anyone’ as Prime Minister and that the PPP would not be allowed to form the government. The uncertainty reached to such an extent that leading jurists of the country, including former Chief Justice Yaqub Ali Kha , wrote a letter to the President to transfer the power to victorious party without any further loss of time. The jurists pointed it out to the President that there is a huge difference in the number of seats won by PPP and IJI, if we give government to the party having limited seats in the assembly, then it will be against the spirit of the Constitution (Dawn, 1988).

The establishment made a concerted effort to break the majority of PPP by creating a forward bloc amongst the party's MNA-elects. "Efforts to prevent Benazir from forming the next government continued until the last possible minute. Close family friends and allies, like Wajid Shamsul Hassan, who would be appointed high commissioner to London during Benazir's second government, recalls the frantic and unsuccessful attempts to persuade newly-elected PPP legislators to switch to the IJI. The prime minister's position was even dangled in front of Benazir's mother, Nusrat, if she could form a coalition without her daughter's participation" (Bhatia 2008).

The establishment tried its best to prevent PPP from forming the government in the Center. The President took ten days in nominating her as the prime minister while every effort was made to break her political strength. Shuja candidly observed in his book that Ghulam Ishaq Khan took his time in nominating Benazir Bhutto as the prime minister, while behind the scene efforts were being made to bring a dispensation acceptable to both the army and the president. "He waited a full ten days before finally conceding that Benazir Bhutto could form the next government" (Nawaz, 2008).

In the final count, she had to make concessions to the powerful establishment to assume power. One of the keen observers of the power games being played in Islamabad and Rawalpindi was the US Ambassador to Pakistan, Robert Oakley. Sharing his observations, he implied in an interview that an informal understanding had been reached between Benazir Bhutto and the establishment that "she wouldn't involve in the nuclear program... or army promotions and assignments of Afghanistan" (Oakley 2008).

With these understandings, she took the oath of the office of Prime Minister of Pakistan on 2 December 1988. As a price-tag attached to her elevation, her party with the help of other parties elected Ghulam Ishaq Khan as the President of Pakistan for next five years as well as endorsed General Mirza Aslam Beg as the Chief of Army Staff for next three years. This way, three positions occupied by General Ziaul Haq before his death, President, Chief of Army Staff and Prime Minister, were occupied by three different persons in the new political set up, which was nicknamed as Troika.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is evident that the sudden death of General Ziaul Haq in a plane crash in August 1988 plunged the country in a state of unprecedented chaos and uncertainty. His successors in the power structure in the immediate aftermath were divided on the future course of the country. While one school of thought favoured following the Constitutional order by holding elections to the assemblies, the other was favour of the imposition of martial law in that extraordinary situation. Both these groups found a middle path in holding elections but manipulating them in such a way that the new setup be in a way continuation of the late General's system. However, in view of the massive political support to Benazir Bhutto, the desired results could not be fully achieved by the establishment. Nevertheless, the brunt of the policies adopted by the caretaker setup after General Ziaul Haq's death shrank the political space for the real political leadership of the country, which in turn created immense challenges for the state of Pakistan in general and the subsequent political governments in particular during the so-called decade of democracy from December 1988 to October 1999.

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