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**Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and the Beginning of Confrontationist  
Power Politics in Pakistan 1971-1977**

**Abstract:**

*This paper mainly explores the genesis of power politics in Pakistan during 1971-1977. The era witnessed political disorders that the country had experienced after the tragic event of the separation of East Pakistan. Bhutto's desire for absolute power and his efforts to introduce a system that would make him the main force in power alienated both, the opposition and his colleagues and supporters. Instead of a democratic stance on competitive policies, he adopted an authoritarian style and confronted the National People's Party, leading to an era characterized by power politics and personality clashes between the stalwarts of the time. This mutual distrust between Bhutto and the opposition - led to a coalition of diverse political groups in the opposition, forming alliances such as the United Democratic Front and the Pakistan National Alliance to counter Bhutto's attempts of establishing a sort of civilian dictatorship. This study attempts to highlight the main theoretical and political implications of power politics between the ruling PPP and the opposition parties which left behind deep imprints on the history of Pakistan leading to the imposition of martial law in 1977. If the political parties tackle the situation with harmony, a firm democracy can establish in Pakistan.*

**Keywords:** Pakhtun Students Federation, Dehi Mohafiz, Shahbaz (Newspaper), Federal Security Force.

**Introduction**

The loss of East Pakistan had caused great demoralization in the country. In the post-break-up situation, the main task before the nation was the integration of the remaining parts of the country. President Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, leader of the largest political party in West Pakistan, was expected to heal the wounds of the nation by creating a congenial political atmosphere which he had promised in his very first speech to the nation. He had invited the opposition leaders to reach a broad-based workable understanding. The offer produced a positive response and the opposition joined him in drafting a unanimous constitution. However, once Bhutto consolidated his position, he became authoritative and adopted coercive policies in the provinces where his party had failed to secure a majority. He attempted to keep absolute powers in his hands in almost every capacity he served. He used these powers against his opponents whom he suspected as a barrier in the execution of his policies. This fostered a mutual mistrust between Bhutto and the opposition that led to an ugly environment of personal vendettas and party conflicts which proved an immense hurdle in the way of much-needed national integration. The political institutions became weak and the whole period was infested with an intense political struggle and power politics. The constant confrontation and power politics caused not only internal political instability but also exposed the country's political and administrative weaknesses to the foreign powers that either directly or indirectly encouraged separatist tendencies in the provinces of Baluchistan and NWFP (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) through local players in Pakistani politics. The political culture promoted during this era was the combination of personality cult, accusations of conspiracies, worse law and order situation, and political murders which caused long-lasting legal disputes that continue till the very end of the Bhutto regime. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to analyze the causes and events responsible for power politics between various political parties and politicians, and their effects on national politics.

**Paradigms of power Politics in Pakistan**

Ever since the independence of Pakistan, frequent attempts had been made by the political forces to pursue their interests and consolidate their party gains instead of national interests.<sup>1</sup> This power struggle among the politicians caused political turmoil and the rise of civil-military bureaucracy to a dominant position with far-reaching consequences.<sup>2</sup> Although the Pakistani leadership, both military and civilian, accepted federalism, in practice, they

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transformed Pakistan into a quasi-unitary, authoritarian state. This is evident from the undemocratic instances set by the leadership of Pakistan by the frequent dissolution of assemblies and the enforcement of martial law and governor's rule.<sup>3</sup> Frequent changes of governments were engineered up to 1958 without holding elections or a vote of no confidence. Many governments were dismissed both at the federal and provincial levels and assemblies were dissolved by the executive fiat.<sup>4</sup> This period was one of the greatest political instability in the government, manifesting the inherent contradictions of the political leadership. The Muslim League, Pakistan's main political force, had also lost ground due to internal disputes and political rivalry. The leadership of the party fell into selfish hands, making intrigues against one another and Maulana Bhashani and Fazal-ul-Haq formed a new party called East Pakistan Awami Muslim League.<sup>5</sup> The military bureaucracy extended its field of activity to politics and influenced the political system of the country for long thirteen years, neutralized democratic norms, and suppressed political leadership.<sup>6</sup>

The continuous regional conflicts and personality clashes in the Constituent Assembly prevented it for a long period to set any compromised formula for the formulation of the Constitution.<sup>7</sup> Despite the constitutional deadlock, mutual mistrust between the two wings of the country over many issues were the major hurdles that affected the main body politics of the nation that ultimately led to the formation of one unit.<sup>8</sup> It was, therefore, natural for the Bengalis that in the event of any electoral contest, they should have expressed their sense of disillusionment. Their choked emotions thus found a vent in the election of December 1970 in which they voted overwhelmingly for Awami League, a party which they believed was fighting for their rights.<sup>9</sup>

The 1970 election results brought two major political parties, i.e. Awami League in East Pakistan and Pakistan People's Party in West Pakistan respectively, to the forefront of national politics.<sup>10</sup> Both the parties had different concerns, Sheikh Mujib remained stubborn on Six Points while Bhutto was not ready to perform the role of opposition in the assembly. This non-compromising approach on the part of political leaders as well as the regime's interests in seeking a role in the future political setup intensified the crises. As a result of this power struggle, the country broke up and Bangladesh emerged as a sovereign state on December 16, 1971.<sup>11</sup>

### **Power politics during 1971-1977**

Pakistan's disintegration had further skewed the country's political scene, and the PPP emerged into a single political force that formed its government at the centre. However, the Separation of East Pakistan did not end the power struggle and the political power play continued to dominate in what was left of Pakistan. The complication in the remaining four provinces of West Pakistan due to the party position multiplied Bhutto's worries to a maximum. The general election of 1970 had brought many regional parties into the arena of national politics. The National Awami Party had emerged as one of the largest political parties as it achieved a majority of seats in the provincial legislatures of NWFP and Baluchistan.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, PPP failed to get any seat from Baluchistan in the National Assembly and got only one from NWFP while in the provincial legislatures of the provinces it had only three seats in the NWFP assembly and none in Balochistan.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, under these circumstances, Bhutto proceeded swiftly to establish his authority by following a dual policy. He had promised the people of Pakistan that the manifesto of PPP was based on the principle "All power to the people". In stark contradiction to that, he exercised power in an autocratic manner.<sup>14</sup> The emergency powers conferred on him were fully exploited to eliminate barriers in the execution of his policies and he dismissed or retired a large number of civil servants and senior army officers without giving them access to the court. Similarly, some 43 high-ranking army officers who had been close to Yahya Khan were dismissed.<sup>15</sup>

### **Confrontation with NAP and JUI in NWFP and Baluchistan**

In a positive gesture of cooperation with the opposition, Bhutto in his first speech lifted the ban on the NAP imposed by Yahya Khan for their dissent on the military operation in East Pakistan. But even after lifting the ban, party politics between the NAP and PPP led to an intense political struggle. It started when Bhutto immediately appointed his nominees as provincial governors and his close associates as his cabinet members.<sup>16</sup> He also put off the formation of a democratic NAP-JUI government in the NWFP and Balochistan.<sup>17</sup> The NAP leadership has repeatedly insisted on appointing its candidates as governors in these two provinces, just as Bhutto appointed his party men as governors in Punjab and Sindh. They also condemned Bhutto for upholding martial law and threatened to launch a massive democracy restoration movement, a demand soon supported by other political parties.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, an unflinching power struggle began between Bhutto and the opposition that turned the true democratic norms into antagonistic approaches and policies.

### **NAP-JUI Alliance: A Marriage of Convenience**

Different political parties with divergent manifestoes joined hands with each other just to make their political survival possible and to gain absolute power. The first instance in this regard worth mention here was the alliance between NAP and JUI. Even though both parties had pursued very different ideologies, they felt the need to cooperate just to gain power and form their ministries.<sup>19</sup> Both Qayyum Khan, leader of the Muslim League Qayyum faction, and NAP needed support from JUI because none of them were in a position to form ministries in Baluchistan and NWFP without the support of the latter. Taking advantage of the existing political atmosphere Mufti Mahmud, the President of the JUI, offered a conditional alliance with the party that was ready to nominate him as the Chief Minister of NWFP. Meanwhile, JUI chose to support NAP because a coalition with PML (Q) would mean sharing power only in NWFP as there was no chance for PML (Q) to form government in Baluchistan.<sup>20</sup> Such an alliance was also expected from the PPP and the NAP, as it was believed that the left parties, like the NAP, would become a natural ally of the PPP because of their common ideology of socialism. But in reality, there were fundamental differences between the two parties and inevitably NAP swung to the right to ally with the JUI.<sup>21</sup>

Bhutto finally realized his failure in gaining power in NWFP and Baluchistan where NAP and JUI had a strong presence. While he had to compete with them politically in these two provinces, he was also in need of their support for the approval of the constitutional draft. He, therefore, made several attempts to settle the differences and develop a working relationship with them.<sup>22</sup> Several rounds of talks were held and he finally reached an agreement with the leaders of NAP and JUI, called the "Tripartite Agreement".<sup>23</sup> Consequently, Bhutto decided to lift martial law and the National Assembly unanimously adopted Pakistan's provisional constitution. The NAP-JUI formed their ministries and their candidates were appointed as governors of NWFP and Balochistan provinces.<sup>24</sup>

The agreement has saved the country from a political stalemate for a while. But it proved a short-lived arrangement and failed to stop the confrontational politics. Bhutto, it was believed, being a shrewd politician agreed with NAP-JUI just to fulfill his objectives like an agreement with International Monetary Fund (IMF), settlement with India, and support on the constitutional draft. It became obvious when the provincial governments were allowed to remain in power for just nine months.<sup>25</sup>

Bhutto's political agenda was based on a dual approach. He allowed the NAP-JUI ministries in these provinces but at the same time, he felt threatened by the growing popularity of their leadership. To counter the NAP-JUI axis he encouraged rival political forces and joined with reactionary elements and appointed Qayyum Khan, a staunch rival of Wali Khan as the Interior Minister of Pakistan.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the induction of Hayat Sherpao into the central cabinet was also not welcomed by the NAP-JUI leadership.<sup>27</sup> In Baluchistan, Abdus Samad Khan Achakzai and Akbar Bugti were encouraged. Akbar Bugti provided Bhutto with a vital justification for dismissing the NAP-JUI government and Bhutto returned the favor by appointing him as the Governor of Baluchistan.<sup>28</sup>

### **Mistrust and Suspicion**

The right-wing conservative politicians and Bhutto had doubts in their minds regarding the disloyalty of NAP leadership to the country due to their pre-partition alliance with Congress. Therefore, every action of NAP was projected as anti-state which created an atmosphere of suspicions and a lack of coordination between the government and opposition. NAP's concept of 'four nationalities' was considered as evidence of the secessionist conspiracy of Wali Khan and Ghaus Bakhsh Bizenjo to establish an independent 'Pakhtunistan and Balochistan' respectively.<sup>29</sup> To make matters worse, the government-controlled media made serious accusations against Attaullah Mengal and Wali Khan that they were planning to carve up the country into a confederacy of quasi-autonomous regions.<sup>30</sup> The NAP-JUI ministry's dismissal in Baluchistan on an allegation of the discovery of arms cache in Iraq's embassy confirmed Bhutto's deep mistrust towards those demanding greater provincial autonomy.<sup>31</sup> The dismissal was followed by the resignation of the Chief Minister of NWFP in protest. Both the provinces came under Presidential rule.<sup>32</sup> Thus, Bhutto succeeded in appointing the provincial governments of his own choice and extended his party influence in these provinces which provided NAP with the justification to criticize the Punjab-dominated central government for its high-handedness.<sup>33</sup>

It is fair to conclude that the NWFP-Balochistan conflict was not a clash between the Pakistani state and separatist forces, but rather a contest between rival political factions and a personal rivalry triggered by Bhutto's crackdown on Baluch and Pakhtun leaders elected to govern these provinces. They wished to retain power and struggled to shed their regional role and build a nationwide following by launching a mass campaign in the provinces of Sind and Punjab.<sup>34</sup> Wali Khan exposed Bhutto to unbridled criticism to undermine his support in Sindh and Punjab, the power

centre of Bhutto's politics. In July 1972, linguistic disturbances in the Sindh reduced Bhutto's appeal and shored up Wali Khan's image as a likely national surrogate in the ensuing general elections.<sup>35</sup>

### **Worse Law and Order Situation**

The growing political instability caused a more shocking law and order situation in the entire country. Some politicians having links with different Political parties were targeted. Explosions and assassinations were becoming a routine matter.<sup>36</sup> The NAP leadership was blamed for the explosions spreading chaos across the country and damaging its unity and integrity in collaboration with neighboring countries hostile to Pakistan (Afghanistan and India).<sup>37</sup> In the case of Balochistan, the situation became further tense when the Federal Government sent Pakistan Army to crush the tribal insurrection at Las Bela.<sup>38</sup>

In NWFP, the situation was equally grave. One of the terrible bomb explosions occurred in Peshawar University on February 8, 1975, which took the life of a senior minister of PPP, Hayat Sherpao.<sup>39</sup> The incident allowed Bhutto to earn sympathies and enlist the support of the people and accused the political opponents of involvement in the blast.<sup>40</sup> The event had far-reaching effects on the future course of politics in the country. It gave enough excuse to Bhutto to ban the NAP through the amendment in the Political Parties Act 1962 and arrest its leaders and activists. Several cases and trials were initiated against the defunct NAP and the legal battle (Hyderabad Tribunal) lasted until the end of the Bhutto era.<sup>41</sup>

### **Politics in Sindh**

The 1970 elections were not encouraging for the PPP in Sindh and it won only 28 of the 60 seats in the Sindh provincial assembly, while in the National Assembly it won only 18 of the 27 seats. The party's support base in Sindh was in the rural Sindhi-speaking areas. The Muhajirs of Karachi and Hyderabad did not vote for the PPP but supported the Islamic parties.<sup>42</sup>

The political disorder soon began to heat up in the province with the declaration of Sindhi as an official language by the newly created government as was promised by them in their election campaign. So much mistrust had already developed between the two communities over the issue. The Urdu-speaking Muhajirs triggered widespread unrest that turned violent, and curfews had to be imposed in some parts. The problem became a grave test of Bhutto's political ability to resolve the ethnolinguistic problems. The newly elected government of Mumtaz Bhutto has not been able to recover from this situation. Bhutto was informed by the pro-Urdu religious party's leader Abul Ala Maudoodi of Jamaat-i-Islami that the Governor and the Chief Minister of the province were held responsible for deteriorated law and order situation by all quarters.<sup>43</sup> Considering the worse situation Bhutto intervened and removed Mumtaz Bhutto and replaced him with Ghulam Mustafa Jatoi.

The Sindhi nationalist party 'Jeeay Sindh' led by G. M. Syed had demanded the separation of Sindh from Pakistan, started the 'Sindh Desh' movement, and denounced Bhutto and the PPP as agents of the Punjab and traitors of the Sindhi cause.<sup>44</sup> The government considered the 'Jeeay Sindh' slogan as a threat to national integrity and G.M. Syed was arrested by the government later on. Pir of Pagaro, another powerful leader of Sindh, became a strong opponent of Bhutto and a leading force in the ousting of Z. A. Bhutto in 1977 when he joined the Pakistan National Alliance (PNA).<sup>45</sup>

### **Political Wrangling in Punjab**

Punjab remained the stronghold of PPP. Without the support of Punjab, Bhutto could not have formed his government. His PPP secured 64 national assembly and 119 provincial assembly seats from Punjab.<sup>46</sup> However, the situation in Punjab was more like a 'civil war within the Peoples Party' rather than a contest with other political parties.

Bhutto assigned important portfolios to ambitious Punjabi politicians. But some of the ideological differences and clashes of personal interests caused splintering within the PPP, especially in Punjab. A highly influential Punjabi leader, Ghulam Mustafa Khar, wielded considerable power during Bhutto's rule and was made Governor of Punjab.<sup>47</sup> After the enactment of the 1973 Constitution, Khar was designated Chief Minister but was removed from the post in March 1974 following a petition to Bhutto by MPAs who accused him of corruption charges.

The new Chief Minister was Haneef Ramay. Mustafa Khar opposed Haneef Ramay and also challenged the land reforms and nationalization measures of Bhutto. Khar organized his supporters into parties. He also contacted both

opposition parties and PPP defectors to challenge Bhutto.<sup>48</sup> In light of this, Bhutto again appointed Khar as governor, but Khar was not satisfied with the governor's subordinate status under the 1973 constitution. So, Bhutto had no choice but to dismiss both Khar and Ramay in July 1975.<sup>49</sup> Khar sought to re-enter the assembly, seeking a by-election for the seat vacated by Ramay, but Bhutto refused to allow him to stand for the party. Police allegedly used gunfire during Khar's election meeting.<sup>50</sup> Both Khar and Ramay, later on, joined hands with the Pakistan Muslim League (Pagaro group) and with other political parties to launch a campaign against Bhutto for ignoring the interests of Punjab, and in October 1975, they launched the "Save Punjab Movement," which was a grave menace to Bhutto's political reputation.<sup>51</sup>

### **The Religious Factor in Punjab**

Apart from the "Save Punjab Movement", the province was also stirred up by another agitation against the Ahmadis. In May 1974, some Jamaat I Islami students from Multan on their way to Peshawar had chanted anti-Ahmadis slogans at Rabwa Railway station. The Ahmadis attacked them on their return and killed some students. This incident caused widespread demonstrations throughout the country.<sup>52</sup> The religious groups called for a debate in the National Assembly on the subject. As a result, a bill to declare Ahmadi as non-Muslim was passed in September 1974.<sup>53</sup> In addition to the political problems, ethnic conflicts such as the agitation in support of Saraikistan province, the struggle of the Bahawalpur United Front, and the language controversy also added to Bhutto's troubles. However, the PPP controlled the situation by adopting a dual policy of repression and cooperation.<sup>54</sup>

### **Bhutto's Controversial Constitutional Amendments and Its political Fallout**

Right from the beginning, Bhutto followed a path in deep contrast with the party's principles which dismayed the masses and his supporters.<sup>55</sup> He had a strong desire to introduce constitutional changes guaranteeing his position and the establishment of one-party dominance in national politics.<sup>56</sup>

The main contribution of his government was the unanimous adoption of the 1973 Constitution. During the intense constitutional debate, he very adroitly brought all political parties together and showed tremendous flexibility in getting a consensus on some of their demands to be reflected in the draft.<sup>57</sup> But once he achieved that consensus then he tried to mold the constitution to his liking through amendments within a short period, affecting the democratic spirit of the constitution. He was interested in retaining the presidential system at the centre but when he had to agree to the demand for parliamentary democracy under the growing pressure from the opposition parties, he preferred to become the prime minister under the new constitution.<sup>58</sup> However, by unduly strengthening the position of the prime minister and making him the final decision-maker at both the central and local levels, it went against the very foundations of the Constitution.<sup>59</sup> The Constitution was amended repeatedly which widened the scope of executive control and reduced the powers of the courts. These efforts further strengthened the influence of the ruling PPP.<sup>60</sup>

Freedom of the press was limited to government publications, and the National Press Trust, promised by Bhutto during his election campaign, was not dissolved.<sup>61</sup> Except for a brief interval, all major cities remained under Section 144 and the opposition was thus prevented from expressing its views or criticizing the government in public meetings. The meetings even held under official permission were disrupted by the Federal Security Force. The firing at the Liaqat Bagh meeting in Rawalpindi on 23 March 1973 resulted in several deaths.<sup>62</sup> The FSF was an intrepid unit used by Bhutto to suppress his political opponents and even his party members in a manner, not in line with his reputation as a popular democratic leader.<sup>63</sup>

### **Towards Bhutto's Fall**

The political struggle between Bhutto and the opposition and some of his party members attained new dimensions by the year 1975. The differences in the PPP had also surfaced and the old and loyal workers of the party were distancing themselves from the party. The Opposition declared his tenure undemocratic and accused PPP of destroying the roots of democracy in the country. The United Democratic Front was forged to confront Bhutto and his authoritarian policies.<sup>64</sup> However, due to the lack of understanding, the opposition parties did not succeed in forming an effective bloc and posing a significant challenge to Bhutto.<sup>65</sup> In another bid to check Bhutto's undemocratic powers, the political parties got together once again and formed the Pakistan National Alliance. The new alliance announced to contest the general election from a single platform.<sup>66</sup> The result of the election, however, was shocking for PNA because PPP secured a sweeping majority.<sup>67</sup> The PNA rejected the results and accused Bhutto of rigging the election. They started countrywide agitation which ultimately compelled Bhutto to invite the opposition leaders for dialogue.<sup>68</sup> The dialogue, however, produced no result, and the stalemate between the government and the opposition continued till General Zia ul Haq promulgated martial law in July 1977.<sup>69</sup>

## **Conclusion**

A famous quotation by a British analyst that “there are no permanent friends and foes in politics but indeed permanent interests”, proved correct about Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and the later regimes of Pakistan. This was the beginning of an era of power politics and personality cult in Pakistan that continues till the present. Every politician or political party promoted a different vision of the state and nation in an attempt to establish their personal and party power base and to undermine the role of their opponents. The five or six years rule of Bhutto is a classic example of confrontation among the politicians, political parties, and within the ruling party itself.

Bhutto sought to seize every opportunity to consolidate his power in almost all the capacities in which he serves. The 1973 Constitution was adopted with consensus but the spirit of cooperation and mutual trust did not last for long. Bhutto’s authoritarian rule did not promote a culture of tolerating dissent. Rather than taking a competitive democratic approach to politics. Through a range of acts, executive regulations, and constitutional amendments, Bhutto succeeded in stifling the opposition at the national tier, while at the regional level he deployed hostile propaganda to discredit the opposition. The growing mistrust and suspicion turned into a strong feeling of insecurity among the common Pakistanis.

In the final analysis, we can rightly conclude that national integration grows gradually in an atmosphere of mutual trust and tolerance. But the process of national integration during the Bhutto era could hardly be seen in the presence of too many misunderstandings and antagonism between personalities, groups, and parties. The deployment of the army in Balochistan and suppression of the NAP leadership in NWFP provided a good opportunity to the hostile neighbors of Pakistan to harm Pakistan by instigating dissidents in the said provinces. At the end of the entire phase of power politics, the army was the winner in the struggle between the political forces. Thus, Bhutto lost the game not to his political rivals but to those who were waiting for the opportunity to get rid of him, the army.

This unpleasant situation could be averted if provisions of the constitution were implemented in letter and spirit and the controversial constitutional amendments were not made by the ruling party without reaching consensus with the opposition. It is likely that Bhutto failed to learn lessons from the failure of East Pakistan and continued the same policy of political confrontation and repression. It is said, however, that among the casualties of this political power struggle was not only politicians like J. A. Rahim, Mahmud Ali Kasuri, Hayat Mohammad Sherpao, and eventually, Bhutto himself but the ultimate loser was the state of Pakistan and the democratic institutions.

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<sup>16</sup> Aftab Ahmad Khan Sherpao, interviewed by author, Islamabad, December 6, 2017.

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- <sup>44</sup> Hamid Khan, 467.
- <sup>45</sup> Ahmad, 47.
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- <sup>50</sup> Hamid Khan, 545.
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- <sup>67</sup> Masood ul Hassan, *Hakomat-o-Sayisat 1947-1990* (Lahore: New Palace, ND), 217.
- <sup>68</sup> *Dawn*, Karachi, March 10, 1977.
- <sup>69</sup> Ziring, 423.