

## Transformation of Islamic Democracy in Pakistan 1977-88: An Analytical Study

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### Abstract

Islamization of the political system in the post-partition Pakistan was a foremost desire of the people but the ground realities were totally different. Since its inception as an independent state, Pakistan has experienced different political dispensations including elected ones patronized by dictatorships. Though elections are one of the prerequisites of a democratic system but they are not the only precondition for a system to be democratic. Democratic attitudes, values, and a conducive environment are must for a flourishing democracy. Although General Zia held elections and there was an elected assembly still we cannot term his system as democratic. The system actually strengthened one person: General Zia with the parliament as a rubber stamp. As General Zia lacked legitimacy to rule, he resorted to the so-called Islamic system to get support of the people. He actually used Islam for his political objectives. The religion card enabled him to enjoy the longest military rule in the country.

**Keywords:** Politics, Local Govt. System, Referendum, Elections, Constitution and Legitimacy, Parliament, Islamization

## Introduction

Islamic ideology played an important role in the Pakistan movement as the slogan for the partition of India was based on a separate homeland for the Muslims. However, no significant steps were taken after the partition to enforce Islamic system in the newly formed state. Secular and liberal people occupied important positions in the state machinery while the religious figures were not only divided among themselves but there was also no agreement on the concept of Islamic system. General Zia ul Haq (1924-1988) belonged to a religious family and later played an important role in the Islamization discourse in the country. According to K.M. Arif, General Zia was inclined toward religion even from his school days, long before becoming a part of the army. As a young officer, Zia ul Haq watched movies and enjoyed music but he also performed five time prayers.<sup>1</sup>

The religious parties played important role in providing an opportunity of General Zia to come into power. As enforcement of Sharia was a major demand of the religious parties in the Pakistan National Alliance (PNA) active against Bhutto, so General Zia took advantage of the prevailing environment by supporting these parties that ultimately supported him in his Islamization scheme in the country. General Zia exploited to his benefit PNA's slogan of Tehrik-e-Nifaz-Mustafa.<sup>2</sup>

After delaying elections, General Zia in his speeches stressed the need for and his plans of enforcement of Islamic system in the country. He actually wanted to use the Islamic card for making amendments in the constitution to serve his own interests before the transfer of power. General Zia had least interest in the Western democracy, so he launched a project to Islamize the political system of Pakistan. When the 1st Hijri Year (1399) after his take over started on December 2, 1978, General Zia declared it as the Foundation of Islamic system. In May 1979, he increased powers of the Council of Islamic Ideology and the Federal Shariat Court. The Zakat Ordinance was introduced in June 1979 and the Islamic Scholars Convention was held in August 1979. He also implemented the Islamic Penal Code.<sup>3</sup>

Through these measures, General Zia was able to improve his image among religious circles. Pakistan People's Party (PPP) criticized General Zia's policies while the Pakistan National Alliance (PNA) welcomed the Islamic policies of Zia-ul-Haq. In the beginning, General Zia pledged to hold elections within ninety days. However, when the political parties realized that General Zia had no plan of holding elections, they started protests against him. Despite the implementation of Martial Law, politicians were allowed to participate in political activities to an extent. While utilizing the available space for political activities, politicians like Asghar Khan, Sheer Baaz Mazaari, Mufti Mahmud and Allama Shah Ahmad Noorani openly criticizing Zia-ul-Haq. In 1979, General Zia again promised to hold elections in November under the supervision of judiciary and army. He also promised that elections would not be delayed. When the deadline came closer, he back tracked from his commitment of holding general elections and announced that he will first hold non-party based local bodies' elections. In addition, General Zia imposed the Political Parties Registration Act and the condition that the Election Commission of Pakistan would carry out audit of political parties' funds. It was in these circumstances that local bodies' elections were held on November 25, 1979. PPP and PNA refused to register themselves according to the amended Political Parties Act.<sup>4</sup> General Zia's local bodies system introduced through Local Government Ordinances (LGOs) was not much different from the one introduced by General Ayub Khan.<sup>5</sup>

In November 1979, the Election Commission of Pakistan announced schedule for the general elections. Nomination papers of candidates of PPP and PNA were rejected because they had refused to register themselves as per the amended parties' act. Nomination papers of minor religious parties like Tehrik-e-Istiqlal, Jamat-e-Islami and others were accepted. Exact a month before the election date, General Zia announced to postpone the General elections for indefinite period. He also imposed on ban on all political parties and political activities. In these circumstances, General Zia felt alone at the international stage. However, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and USSR's invasion of Afghanistan the same year provided opportunity to him to come

out of his international isolation. Due to these two developments in the region, his importance drastically increased for the West and Pakistan under Zia emerged as most important Non-Allied NATO ally.

General Zia's Islamization policies were greatly inspired by the Saudi Arab model of Islamic system. This move of him invited strong criticism from different Islamic schools of thought. While paving way for his new system in the name of Islam, he first started targeting political parties and personalities and then he used accountability by military courts to further victimize politicians. General Zia's this approach resulted in the formation of Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD) though he was not much worried about it. MRD held demonstrations against the government from time to time. Most of the top leaders of the movement were in imprisoned. An end to martial law was one of the main demands of MRD. Being too much busy in state affairs, General Zia did not pay much attention to MRD's demands. In 1981, he released the salient features of his controlled Islamic democracy. On the occasion of budget session in June 1981, General Zia remarked that amendments in the constitution are indispensable for the complete enforcement of Islamic system. A high level committee was formed with the responsibility to present amendments to the 1973 Constitution of Pakistan. The committee was supposed to consult all political parties before presenting its report, to keep in view Islamic principles while making its report and to strike balance between the offices of the president and the prime minister. General Zia also kept consulting different political players about the establishment of a federal advisory council or Majlis-e-Shoora though no leading figure supported his plan. On December 24, 1981, he announced to constitute Majlis-e-Shoora consisting of 350 nominated members. It had one chairman, four vice-chairmen. Out of its total members, 146 were from Punjab, 71 from Sindh, 52 from the then N. W. F. P, and 18 from Balochistan.<sup>6</sup>

General Zia also tried to provide some kind of justification for the postponement of elections. He said that holding elections under those circumstances was like damaging country's solidarity, integrity, and peace.<sup>7</sup>

The nominated members of Majlis-e-Shoora took oath and were given the task to harmonize Pakistani society with the principles of Islam. The nominated Members took Oath and they were given task for establishing the society on the basis of Islamic principles. Pakistan Muslim League (PML), Jamiat-e-Islami (JI) and Pakistan People Party (PPP) joined Majlis-e-Shoora. Though the senior members of PPP refused to become part of it but accorded permission to the subsidiary professional organizations functioning under PPP. The first session of Majlis-e-Shoora was held on January 11, 1982. On this occasion, the president explained the objectives, duties and jurisdiction of Majlis-e-Shoora. Khawaja Muhammad Safdar was nominated its Chairman. Khawaja Safdar, while equating Majlis-e-Shoora with National Assembly, declared it as the best forum at that time.

In January 1982, foreign policy was discussed in an in-camera session for the first time since the military coup took place in 1977. As press was under tight censorship, the general public did not get any information about this discussion. Only an official handout was released by officials of Majlis-e-Shoora. The second session of Majlis-e-Shoora was held on April 3, 1982. Addressing the session of Majlis-e-Shoora, General Zia said that elections will be held soon but the country cannot afford politics or confrontation and agitation. A similar statement was given by Interior Minister Mahmud Haroon in Majlis-e-Shoora. The budget session was summoned and passed on June 16, 1982. Zia-ul-Haq issued an Ordinance about Islamic Banking.<sup>8</sup> He termed as the first step towards the Islamization of country's economy. In the same session of Majlis-e-Shoora, he also announced a policy for future politics. He said that he has painstakingly contemplated on constitutional and political affairs and in this he greatly benefited from the Quranic verses and Hadith-e-Nabawi (PBUH). General Zia also organized a team of pro-Islam trend and awarded its members with important positions in state institutions. Municipal, Provincial and National Assembly members were chosen on behalf of religious trends with the help of this team. A special committee headed by Fida Muhammad Khan was formed for future political reforms. The committee presented its recommendations in July 1982. It suggested that

sixty percent seats should be filled by directly elected representatives, twenty percent should be reserved for intellectuals and technocrats and fifteen percent seats be reserved for persons nominated by the president of Pakistan.<sup>9</sup> Majlis-e-Shoora approved this report which was later submitted to the president for approval. General Zia disagreed with the contents of the report and thus rejected it. Later on, he constituted a commission under the chairmanship of Maulana Zafar Ahmad Ansari (1932-1989). This commission came under criticism from various religious & political circles.<sup>10</sup> There were actually efforts for paving path for presidential system in the country. Thus, the Ansari Report faced strong opposition both from political circles and the press. While responding to this report, Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Pakistan (JUP) said that this report was entirely based on the wrong interpretation of the Islamic perspective.<sup>11</sup> The basic purpose of General Zia in striving to implement the reports of various committees and commissions was to prolong his own rule. In the light of recommendations of the Ansari report, General Zia announced an eighteen months long roadmap. He announced the schedule for the non-party based elections which exposed his political designs and contradicted his claim of having no political aims. Maulana Shah Ahmad Noorani (1927-2004) said that the government had lost its confidence just to see that would live up till March 25, 1985.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Zia-ul-Haq said that he will amend the 1973 Constitution so the elections could be held on the basis of Shariat to remove conceptual difference.<sup>13</sup> He further said that he possessed all authority to amend the constitution and the government enjoyed full legal authority. General Zia was actually nurturing the desire for constitutional amendments for quite some time. In order to materialize his dreams, he sought support from different people and figures like Syed Shariffudin Pirzada and A.K. Brohi provided full support and held a number of meetings with him. Daily Times accurately gauged General Zia's actual desire for political engineering. It revealed that general Zia wanted constitutional amendments that would strengthen his position as the president of the country.<sup>14</sup> General K.M. Arif, who was a close aid of General Zia and a part of his cabinet. Arif had proclaimed that

the electoral process would be completed by March 25, 1985 and that the armed forces will be given constitutional role in the political system of the country.<sup>15</sup>

In public meetings, General Zia would frequently stress the need for constitutional amendments. He would tell the nation that Allah Almighty has given him a task to accomplish and he would not leave it incomplete.<sup>16</sup> General Zia also started saying that elections for the head of the state (president) should precede the elections to Majlis-e-Shoora (Parliament). He claimed that Pakistan was faced with some many serious security threats and he wants to hold a referendum to ask the public as which type of government between the Islamic and the Western one they want.<sup>17</sup>

In April, he repeated his earlier claims that he had no political ambitions and thus would not contest the upcoming election. He, however, gave a clue about his plans to conduct referendum. He actually wanted the referendum to strengthen his position, so he faced strong opposition from his political opponents. The schedule for the referendum was announced on December 1, 1984. General Zia launched his campaign for the referendum and held many political gatherings across the country. Members of Majlis-e-Shoora were sent to their respective areas to mould public opinion in favor of the referendum and urge people to come out on the polling day. He, through an ordinance, even announced minor penalties for those abstaining from voting on the referendum day or boycotting it. He announced that for his success he relied on his army which he described as the 37000 Elected Local Councilors elected in 1983, 175,000 Nazimeen of Zakat-o-Usher and 1, 80,000 Nazimeen-e-Salaat.<sup>18</sup> In addition to this, about 1.5 million serving and retired army personnel were also included in his electoral brigade.

In his referendum campaign, he would tell the people that they would decide whether they supported his government's policies and whether they believed in the ideology of Pakistan and desired to protect it. Whether they agree with him to enforce Islamic system in the country. And positive response from the public would mean that they expressed their confidence in his government.

Positive response from the public also meant election of General Zia as president for the next five years from March 25, 1985 to March 1990.<sup>19</sup>

He also promulgated an ordinance which could not be challenged in any court of law. He remarked that an unusual procedure of election was being adopted because of the prevailing circumstance. Thus, General Zia got himself elected as president for another term of five years. The question asked in the referendum was very interesting. It was: "*Do you support the act of President of Pakistan, Zia-ul-Haq, which he has commenced for getting the national laws harmonious with the Islamic commandments according to the Holy Quran and Sunnah (PBUH) for the protection of Pakistan's ideology. Do you support this process to continue and further adorn and transfer of power to the elected public representatives in a peaceful manner?*"<sup>20</sup>

The Election Commission claimed that 62.21 percent of the total eligible voters exercised right of vote and 97.71% of them approved of General Zia's policies.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, opposition parties rejected the results claiming that polling stations presented a deserted look showing lack of enthusiasm. They alleged that the chief election commissioner grossly exaggerated the turnout. The MRD claimed that the turnout was between 5 to 10%. Media reports also suggested that the turnout was about 10%. Claims of both sides seem to be on their extreme with the facts lying somewhere in the middle. Voters did not come out in large number to participate in the referendum and instead state machinery was used to make the referendum a success story. It may also be noted that MRD too could not make any advancement in achieving its objectives either before or after the referendum. Professor Ghafoor Ahmad has strongly criticized General Zia for openly canvassing for his referendum. General Zia would tell people that "Your vote in my favor will be the vote in support of the Islamic democracy to be imposed till March 23, 1985."<sup>22</sup>

The referendum also invited criticism from outside of the country. London Times reported it with the title of "In the Name of Allah." It reported that General Zia organized a referendum to secure a five years term for himself. It observed that General Zia presented himself as a well-wisher of Islam and the

rigging was done in such a foolish and ridiculous manner that even communist dictators would have felt shame in doing so.<sup>23</sup> PPP termed the referendum as a strange act of drama.<sup>24</sup> Asghar Khan responded to the referendum results by saying that it was a big joke with the nation and that they already knew about General Zia's intentions.<sup>25</sup> Ghulam Mustafa Jatoi too expressed his doubts about the veracity of results declared by the election commission. According to his assessment, the turnout was only 5-6%.<sup>26</sup>

If we analyze the referendum independently, it emerges that it did not reflect the true opinions of the populace. In the first place, nobody was allowed to criticize the idea of the referendum. Similarly, there were other restrictions on people including restrictions on movement of some figures. Thus, it was a one-sided show. Secondly, polling stations presented a deserted look with very few voters visiting them. It were local bodies' members and government officials who would cast votes on behalf of people. As the staff had clear directions for filling the boxes with stamped ballot papers, so there were individuals who polled several dozen votes in favor of General Zia. According to Zafar Mahmud, the objective of the referendum was to know about people's opinion about government's success. He remarked that though the official result about turnout was 62% but general public believed it was around 20%.<sup>27</sup>

After strengthening his own position through the doubtful referendum, General Zia did not feel any threat from the assembly which was to be elected after the referendum. Thus, he on January 12 1985 announced to hold parliamentary and provincial elections on February 25 and 28, respectively. A total of 1200 candidates submitted their nomination papers for the NA seats and some 3600 candidates for the seats of the four provincial assemblies.<sup>28</sup>

General Zia also announced to hold the general elections on non-party and adult franchise basis. The total number of NA seats was increased to 237 from 217 with 217 general seats and 10 seats reserved each for minorities and women. Similarly, Senate's seats were increased to 87 from 63 and elections on these Senate seats were held in mid-March. The inaugural session of parliament was convened on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1985.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the fact that the elections were non-party based, voters and several political parties took active part in them. As MRD boycotted the elections, so PPP left the electoral arena for other parties due to which candidates of parties like JI and PML got clear victories on their seats. Though PPP boycotted the elections still 22 candidates who were basically affiliated with PPP won their seats as independent candidates. Unlike the referendum, turnout this time was much high. According to election commission reports, the combined turnout of national and provincial assemblies was 53.9%. The pro-government newspaper Pakistan Times highly exaggerated the turnout and presented figure of 70%.<sup>30</sup>

The final results clearly reflected the dominance of the properties class. For example, 157 of the successful members of NA were landlord and tribal chiefs, 54 were businessmen, 18 urban professionals, 6 religious leaders, and only 3 were others.<sup>31</sup> Before the newly elected took oath, General Zia changed some fundamental articles of the Constitution of 1973. As he was looking for a kind of partnership with the civilians, he choose a mediocre personality in the form of Muhammad Khan Junejo to lead the civilian government.

### **Conclusion**

General Zia extensively used religion for prolonging and strengthening his rule. He invested much energy and time in the political system of the country but after his death it ultimately proved a house of cards. The so-called democracies that nourished under the shadow of dictators like Basic Democracy or Controlled Islamic Democracy were destined to die their natural death once the patronage of their patrons came to an end. Development of democratic norms and practices need a conducive environment free from dictatorial policies of few individuals. The system introduced by General Zia in the name of Islam and democracy did not strike its roots deeper in the Pakistani society. Instead, it only perpetuated his own otherwise illegitimate rule.

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