

Pakistan's Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (1981-1984)

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Summary of events related to the use or impact of civil resistance
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Conflict Summary:

A coalition of eleven Pakistani political parties known as the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD) formed in 1983 to pressure the dictatorial regime of Muhammad Zia-ul Haq to hold elections and suspend martial law. The MRD, which remained mostly nonviolent, was strongest among supporters of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in Sindh Province. Though it launched one of the most massive nonviolent movements in South Asia since the time of Gandhi, failure to expand beyond its southern stronghold combined with effective repression from the military led to its demise a year and half later.

Political History:

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto became President of Pakistan in 1971 and Prime Minister in 1973 and served in both positions until a coup ousted him in 1977. Bhutto was native to Pakistan's Sindh Province, which lies in the far southeast of the country bordering India and the Arabian Sea. He was charismatic and popular among supporters of the large Pakistan People's Party (PPP), which he had founded. The PPP slogan was, "Islam is our faith, democracy is our policy, socialism is our economy: All power to the people." President Bhutto nationalized major industries, increased the power of worker's unions and redistributed over a million acres to landless peasants. He convened the National Assembly on April 14, 1972 to create a new constitution that they completed a year later.

Bhutto's popularity, however, sharply declined in subsequent years as he also assumed the role of Prime Minister. From 1974 to 1977 Pakistan experienced a series of high profile assassinations, disputed elections and episodes of political infighting that created a sense of public disorder. Corruption was ubiquitous and Bhutto made a series of unpopular compromises with landholders and elites. Bhutto's opponents would often disappear. Organized street demonstrations against him became increasingly common. The military finally responded to rising anti-government unrest by staging a coup in July 1977 and arresting Bhutto and members of his cabinet charging them with complicity in political assassination. Army Chief of Staff General Muhammad Zia-ul Haq became Chief Martial Law Administrator and claimed

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immediate control of Pakistan by suspending the new constitution and dissolving national assemblies.

Zia promised to hold elections within three months of taking power, but never did. He pursued a broad policy of Islamization of a particularly reactionary orientation, reintroducing such medieval punishments as amputation, stoning and flogging. The United States, traditionally Pakistan's biggest foreign backer, suspended aid in 1977 due to its nuclear program. Zia's isolation ended with the Soviet invasion of neighboring Afghanistan in late 1979, which precipitated massive U.S. investment in Pakistan's military. Billions of dollars and weaponry flowed to the Afghan Mujahadeen by way of the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence Agency (ISI). Zia was transformed overnight from a reprehensible dictator to an ally in the fight against Soviet communism.

Zukifar Ali Bhutto was tried, convicted and sentenced to death. Despite appeals by foreign leaders for clemency for the former president, he was hanged in April 1979. Meanwhile, nearly 3,000 PPP supporters were jailed, many of whom remained imprisoned for the next decade. Zia was particularly unpopular in the Sindh Province, where support for the PPP remained relatively strong.

The first stirrings of a significant opposition movement against Zia's regime arose in February of 1981. Eleven diverse political parties formed a coalition called Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD) to pressure Zia's regime to hold elections and suspend martial law. Zukifar Ali Bhutto's PPP was prominently included, as well as the Awami Tehrik, the Jamiatul-Ulemai Islam, the National Awami Party, the National Democratic Party, the Pakistan Mazdoor Kisan Party, the Pakistan Muslim League, the Pakistan National Party, the Quami Mahaz-i-Azadi and the Tehrik-e-Istiqlal. Many of the parties in the MRD were formerly antagonistic to each other, but became united in opposition to Zia. The primary base of support for the MRD lay in the Sindh Province.

The MRD immediately initiated a campaign to pressure Zia to suspend martial law and restore democracy. They issued a press release calling for free, fair and impartial elections. However, the effort soon became compromised when armed hijackers seized a Pakistan International Airlines

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plane and forced it to land in Kabul, Afghanistan. The hostage takers killed several passengers, among them a member of a powerful Pakistani family. The hijackers belonged to a group known as Al-Zukifار, which was led by Bhutto's son. The popular backlash to the terrorists' links to the MRD, however indirect, crippled the movement. It would take two years to recover from the hijacking.

By 1983, the MRD regained enough momentum to reassert itself. Zia sensed the MRD would likely choose Independence Day, August 14, to renew its offensive. To cut them off he announced a plan for the restoration of democracy on August 12, 1983. However, Zia's speech elaborated merely an intention to move toward democracy rather than any specific proposals. Details regarding the role of the military, the 1973 constitution, and the future of political parties were left unclear.

The MRD, deflated by the surprise move, nonetheless called for the launch of a popular campaign two days later. Based on lessons learned in previous civil insurrections, including the abortive 1968-69 uprising against the Ayub Khan dictatorship and the 1977 protests against Bhutto himself, MRD organizers ordered movement leaders to seek voluntary arrest and rally their supporters in the streets. To avoid alienating the public, a policy of selective aggression was advanced in which MRD supporters channeled their energy against government personnel rather than public property. Uniformed military personnel were similarly avoided in the hope of minimizing violent retaliation. Foreign news media were updated of arrests and violence, but domestic news – heavily censored by the regime – remained quiet. MRD organizers led processions out of Sindh villages to provoke arrest. Millions of people took part in boycotts and strikes and hundreds of thousands took part in demonstrations. The conflict became particularly intense in rural areas of Sindh Province.

Zia's effort to portray the MRD as an Indian-backed conspiracy to destabilize Pakistan was without merit, but gained credence among some Pakistanis when Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi endorsed the movement in an address to the lower house of the Indian parliament. Despite charges to the contrary, the MRD in Sindh was not attempting to secede from Pakistan but instead was focused on the restoration of the constitution. However, particularly under the leadership of PPP veteran Ghulam Mustafa Jatoi, the

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MRD was perceived by many to be a Sindhi movement seeking redress for various grievances at the hands of the majority Punjabi-dominated administration in Islamabad. As a result, it became difficult for the movement to expand beyond its base in that southern province. Zia's interior secretary, Roedad Khan, later wrote that the regime was able to manipulate this perception to their advantage and prevent the MRD from gaining greater appeal on a nationwide level.

Within Sindh, however, the movement had broad support, forcing Zia to send 45,000 troops into the province to suppress the uprising. Between 60 and 200 people were killed and up to 15,000 were arrested. The jails overflowed and the regime was forced to set up camps to keep prisoners in tents. By November, it became apparent that the movement was not gaining momentum nationally and Zia was not prepared to concede. The Pakistani military was quite effective in its repression, avoiding where possible those seeking arrest and not creating martyrs by arresting the top leadership, but instead rounding up the second and third level organizers on the community level. This strategy cut the center out of the Movement organization. In 1984, Zia called for a referendum seeking approval for his ultra-conservative and authoritarian brand of Islamization. Most of the MRD parties boycotted the referendum and only 10 percent of eligible voters participated. Nonetheless, Zia declared a victory and hung on to office.

In August 1988, Zia was killed in a suspicious plane crash that also took the lives of many of his top aides and the U.S. ambassador to Pakistan. Elections that soon followed returned the PPP to power and the MRD dissolved. After a decade of largely democratic but corrupt rule, another military government seized power, receiving well over a billion dollars in U.S. military assistance over the next eight years until General Pervez Musharraf was forced out in 2008 in large part due to a civil insurrection led by lawyers and other civil society organizations

Strategic Actions:

Boycott, mass demonstrations, voluntary arrest. However, some nonviolent resistance has been mixed with rioting and small-scale armed clashes.

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Ensuing Events:

Pakistan is today technically democratic, although the PPP government does not have total control of much of the military and intelligence agencies. The current government is also riddled with corruption and is still dominated by the same elite families that had run the PPP for decades, raising questions regarding the depth and future of Pakistani democracy. However, the emergence of civil society movements in the Sindh uprising of the 1980s and in the more recent struggle against the Musharraf regime give some promise of the emergence of a new political culture.

Further Reading:

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