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The Democratic Collapse and the Rise of Praetorian Order Rethinking Pakistan's Political Trajectory from Bhutto to Zia

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Abstract
This article revisits the political development of Pakistan's civilian government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1971-1977) and the military regime of General Muhammad Zia ul Haq (1977-1988). It claims that the democratic experiment of Bhutto was flawed and undermined the foundations of democracy, while the praetorian regime of Zia systematically established military rule by constitutional manipulation, Islamization and discrediting competitive politics. Based on the historical institutionalist views, the analysis demonstrates that both periods have been important for the continuity of civil-military imbalance, not just the failure of democracy and success of military rule. A central theme of the study is that Bhutto's lack of willingness to institutionalize democratic norms within his own party, his confrontational approach to politics and his centralization of power undermined the very principles of parliamentary democracy he was promoting. The resulting weaknesses provided a political opportunity that the military took advantage of in a campaign of destabilization culminating in the coup of 1977. In office, Zia embarked on a clear path of constitutional amendments, judicial subordination, and development of a religious faction that provided the constitutional framework for military rule, and that served to divide the civilian opposition. The article follows the legacy of both of these eras, Bhutto's unaddressed institutional shortcomings, and Zia's powerful praetorian structure, on the course of subsequent political events and their continuing impact on democratic consolidation in Pakistan. It also explores the part played by the external factors such as the Cold war geopolitical and regional security dynamics in strengthening the military prerogatives during this period. This work places the Bhutto-Zia transition in a wider theoretical context of praetorianism and institutional change, and suggests a more complex understanding of the mechanisms by which democratic failures take place, not only through the brute force of military ambition, but through the dynamic interplay of civilian institutional failure and strategic military intervention. The study recommends that structural conditions that give rise to praetorian interventions, such as weak party institutionalization, judicial dependence, the strategic deployment of religious legitimacy by the successive regimes, and absence of a durable consensus on civil-military boundaries, need to be addressed to achieve a lasting democratic consolidation in Pakistan..

Keywords: *Pakistan, Praetorianism, Civil-Military Relations, Bhutto, Zia Ul Haq, Democratic Consolidation, Islamization, Institutional Weakness*

Introduction

Since independence, Pakistan has experienced several alternations of civilian governments and military takeovers, and the time between 1971 and 1988 was a critical period in the establishment of praetorian patterns (Rizvi, 2000). Samuel Huntington's theory of praetorianism refers to conditions in which the strength of the political institutions is low compared to the degree of social mobilization, enabling the military to take over when the civilian sector is unable to keep its citizens in check (Huntington, 1968). The Bhutto years in Pakistan came after the military's defeat in 1971, and initially presented the apparent possibility of civilian supremacy being institutionalized under the 1973 Constitution, but were marred by allegations of electoral fraud and the July 1977 coup. The Zia regime to come was not just a temporary one, but one which re-engineered the state in the form of the Eighth Amendment, the Islamization programme, and the systematic marginalisation of political parties, leaving institutional scaffolding that hampered subsequent civilian governments (Shafqat, 1997). This path calls for a measured re-evaluation that doesn't overlook the positive aspects of the Bhutto era as a democratic golden era, nor dismiss the Zia's era as an automatic cure for civilian excesses. Rather, the available evidence suggests that Bhutto's 'selective use of coercive instruments' and 'personalisation of power' created a state of un-governability, and that Zia's prolonged stay in power institutionalised military dominance and integrated religion with the state institutions, whose influence continues to shape the political competition. (Jalal, 1990; Hussain, 1994).

The significance of this period lies in its enduring institutional consequences. The Bhutto government period illustrated the potential and fragility of the democratic consolidation of the political system, characterized by low institutionalization of political parties and high autonomy of security and foreign policy of the military. Although Bhutto introduced the Constitution of 1973, which formally established a parliamentary system and gave powers to the provinces, Bhutto's style of Government focused on the central government, with the Prime Minister, and ignored the internal party democracy. His government's confrontational attitude to opposition parties, the bureaucracy and the judiciary made it hard to influence the regime and gave it too narrow a political base, which the military was able to exploit. The post-1977 military regime of General Zia ul Haq exploited these weaknesses, basing its claim to Islamic legitimacy and the notion of accountability on the notion of Islamic legitimacy. The government in the name of Zia then embarked on a systematic process of constitutional engineering, such as the Eighth Amendment that transferred significant powers from Prime Minister to President and firmly established the military as an integral part of the government (Rizvi, 2004). This was paralleled by a process of Islamisation that transformed the legal framework, the education syllabus and the public sphere, and it had the effect of debilitating secular political parties and civil society organisations. These measures led to an institutionalized praetorian order which was not only coercive, but which made it also hard for subsequent civilian governments to regain democratic primary.

The focus of this article is therefore on situating the Bhutto-Zia transition in a historical institutionalist perspective, given its attention to the role of critical junctures in shaping path-dependent answers to questions about civil-military relations. The examination of the internal inconsistencies of the Bhutto government, and the institutional tactics of the military dictatorship of the Zia regime, illustrates that a failure of democracy in Pakistan is not exclusively due to military greed or to outside forces. Instead, it came about because of a mix of institutional failures of the civilian side and military strategic intervention, which is continuing to influence the political dynamics in Pakistan. The book addresses the more general scholarly discussions on praetorianism and democratic consolidation, and is an evenhanded reconsideration of a history

that is a lot of times discussed in binary terms, as either a failure of democracy or a success of military rule. It aims to help build a richer picture of the process of building, maintaining and, ultimately, destroying praetorian orders. The subsequent sections explore the flaws in Bhutto's rule, the establishment of praetorian rule under Zia and its long-term impact on democratic consolidation in Pakistan.

Literature Review

The structural shortcomings of the political institutions of Pakistan have been a focus of scholarly discussion of the Bhutto Zia transition. Ayesha Jalal's work on the political economy of defence examines the history of the early years of independence and looks at how the space for strong party systems was restricted by the security imperatives and bureaucratic military alliances that occurred during this period (Jalal, 1990). The increasing importance of military as a praetorian force that could intervene in situations where civilian governments seemed incapable of providing stability is recorded by Hasan Askari Rizvi who has been documenting its gradual evolution from a military corps for external defence to one for internal pacification (Rizvi, 1974, 2000). Saeed Shafqat has compared the civil-military relations since 1971 and found that while the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) gained a footing after 1971, it was short-lived because Bhutto was unable to build a strong party organization, depending instead on personal charisma and the Federal Security Force (Shafqat, 1997).

Stanley Wolpert's biography of Bhutto notes his ambivalent nature as a leader who made populist promises while concentrating power and the manner in which he conducted the elections in 1977, which offered the immediate excuse for military intervention. The studies of the Zia period also provide evidence of the autonomy of parliament, judiciary and political parties being limited by the constitutional amendments and Islamization policies of the regime, which resulted in path dependent constraints on post-Zia democratic experiences (Richter 1978, Hussain 1994, Shafqat 2019). Overall, these works indicate that the failure of civilian actors to establish competitive politics in 1977 was not the only cause of the democratic breakdown, rather it was also a result of the civilian actors' inability to rebuild it while the praetorian order that ensued was actively making it impossible to do so (Ziring, 1980; Talbot, 1998).

Problem Statement

The literature tends to view the Bhutto and Zia eras as two phases in which the problems with the first were followed by the excesses of the latter. These frames cover up the fragility of the Bhutto government's institutions, and the Zia regime's deliberate effort to shift the rules of the political game in the military's and bureaucracy's direction. Given that democratic consolidation has not come about despite a series of transitions back to civilian government, it is hard to account for the failure to democratize without analyzing both the democratic deficits of the civilian government and the deliberate engineering of the military regime's institutions. Bhutto's democratic credentials have been highlighted, and his interpretation of the 1977 coup has blamed it entirely on the military ambition, whereas the accounts of the military coup as a corrective neglect the fact that barriers to military intervention were broken down because of the centralization of decision-making and manipulation of state institutions, and that Zia's regime was not a necessary corrective at all, in that it was the result of deliberate efforts to dismantle competitive politics and judicial independence. A better way of thinking about the transition is as a single analytical moment in which the civil and military institutional weaknesses and strategic calculations played reinforcing roles in each other's development and established a lasting praetorian framework that today affects democratic consolidation in Pakistan.

Objectives

1. To examine the internal dynamics of the Bhutto government including its constitutional achievements and the practices that undermined institutional legitimacy.
2. To analyze the mechanisms through which the Zia regime converted a temporary intervention into a durable praetorian order.
3. To assess the combined legacies of both periods for subsequent civil military relations and democratic prospects in Pakistan.

Research Questions

1. In what ways did the governance practices of the Bhutto period contribute to the conditions that enabled military intervention in 1977?
2. How did the Zia regime restructure constitutional political and ideological institutions to sustain military dominance?
3. What enduring patterns of civil military imbalance can be traced to the interaction of the Bhutto and Zia periods?

Methodology

The study is qualitative and historical institutionalist in nature using secondary sources like scholarly monographs, peer-reviewed articles and contemporary analysis of Pakistani politics. The emphasis is on documented events and the changes in the constitution rather than on partisan narratives, with the focus being on patterns of institutional behavior. Theories of praetorianism and institutional decay are used as comparison to understand the trajectory without favoring either of the civilian or military phase. The analysis is based on the relationship between formal provisions in the constitution and informal dynamics of the exercise of power, revealing how the institutional design influenced the incentives and constraints on civilian and military actors. The historical institutionalist approach focuses on the timing of events and their sequence: the centralization of power under Bhutto and the constitutional changes that Zia had brought in had long-term effects on future political possibilities. This method enables a comfortable comparison between the two periods, while avoiding the danger of making the analysis into a morality tale. Rather, both eras are considered as consecutive moments in a single path of institutional evolution, which were the result of the interplay of civilian vulnerability and military tactics that led to a lasting praetorian regime.

The Bhutto Experiment and Its Contradictions

The government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto that came after the military defeat in 1971 and the loss of East Pakistan was a chance to establish civilian institutions on a more participatory basis (Wolpert, 1993; Burki, 1980). The 1973 Constitution marked an important step towards a parliamentary system and the formalization of civilian supremacy over the military, but there was a sharp disconnect between the ideals of such a system and its implementation (Shafqat, 1997). The nationalization agenda and land reforms garnered support from some sectors of the population and opposition from entrenched elites, and the establishment of the Federal Security Force (FSF) offered a second coercive force which was deployed against political adversaries (Ahmed et al., 2020). They were measures designed to give the prime minister a big say in the management of government and to avoid those same parliamentary institutions that the Constitution had tried to put in place. The tension between form and practice of the constitution was not only a feature of the regime's history but was intrinsic to it; every step toward centralization further reduced the government's popular base and increased the alienation of key institutional supporters.

In 1977, the general elections were won by the Pakistan People's Party with such massive majority that wasn't fought with much enthusiasm by the Pakistan National Alliance, as there

were many reported irregularities in the election process of selected constituencies, causing a prolonged street agitation (Kokab, 2021; Kamran, 2009). In the aftermath of a collapse in the legitimacy of the government and a continuing protest movement, Bhutto made various concessions, including the promise of fresh elections in disputed constituencies, and for the military under General Zia ul Haq to intervene on 5 July 1977 with the declared intent of establishing order and holding fair elections within three months (Rizvi, 2000). This was clear from the opposition's willingness to keep the agitation going for a long time and the government's failure to establish public trust through negotiation. The election controversy that could have been handled properly was transformed into a systemic crisis due to the fact that the regime had already depleted the pool of trust in institutions that had been at its disposal.

The evidence also shows that external factors and the military's corporate interests helped increase the weak capacity of the civilian government to manage political contestation, but that the party's institutional strength was undermined by the personalization of power and the institutional weakness of the party organs in relation to the military. (Jalal 1990, Shafqat 1997). Bhutto's inability to allow for any dissent within the Pakistan People's Party, his habit of making decisions on the spur of the moment without going through the proper institutional channels, and his anti-judiciary and anti-bureaucratic stance created a climate in which the military could be the figurehead of stability. The contradiction in the Bhutto era is that it was a real achievement in terms of constitutionality, while at the same time it was a continuous violation of democratic norms. The knowledge of this paradox is crucial to the understanding of the nature of the transition to military rule in 1977, which did not happen just because it was decided by military men but because it was the result of a political system already plagued by its own problems.

The Coup of 1977 and the Onset of Praetorian Rule

The military coup of July 1977 started with a brief period of transition, but soon turned into a prolonged period of non-competitive politics (Richter, 1978). From the beginning, General Zia ul Haq released Bhutto and permitted political activity as he readied himself for elections, but then changed his mind when it became clear that the Pakistan People's Party had much popular support remaining (Wolpert, 1993). The arrest of Bhutto and his subsequent trial for murder (which was observed but not conducted properly by independent observers) effectively took away the primary civilian opposition and served as an indication that the regime was prepared to dispose of political opposition (Rizvi, 2000; Ziring, 1980). In this early period the military also started to establish alliances with religious parties which had been part of the opposition against Bhutto, paving the way for the later Islamization programme (Hussain, 1994). The actions showed that it wasn't an "anything goes" approach, but rather a proactive, calculated move to create the political environment for the regime to stay in power indefinitely.

The delay in elections beyond the first ninety days and later the ban on political parties in 1979 was the beginning of the praetorian consolidation (Shafqat, 1997) as a deliberate project. Recent reports and subsequent academic studies suggest that the regime's resolve to stay in power was reinforced by both perceived threats from elections and the prospect of reconfiguring political structures to restrict the future civilian political agenda (Rizvi, 2004; International Crisis Group, 2004). The ban was especially significant as it destroyed the party organisation that had allowed civilian opposition to be organised while giving the military a monopoly on organised political activity. The postponement of elections, the assassination of Bhutto, the fostering of religious allies and the ultimately banned parties on the back of the previous ones, each step of the sequence was a smart move by the regime that made leaving the country increasingly difficult.

The series of judgments would indicate that the lengthening of military rule was not the result of a mistake, but a wise tactic for remodeling the political contest. The early rhetoric of 'restoring

order' was used to justify the introduction, but later moves suggested that the regime had a broader agenda to restore the institutional structure of the state. The military eliminated the organizational foundations of civilian politics, filled religious parties into their system, and by deposing Bhutto opened the door for the military to fill the gap it had created. The shift from corrective intervention to praetorian consolidation was then accompanied by a series of conscious decisions which made it increasingly difficult for the emperor to return to civilian rule and to consolidate the military in its institutional structures. The knowledge of the course of the coup is crucial to the understanding of the endurance of the Zia regime and the challenge of getting back to democratic government once it has been overturned.

Institutional Engineering under Zia and the Islamization Project

The Zia regime's influence was more to do with its systematic reengineering of the rules of political competition than the coup itself. The Eighth Amendment of the Constitution of Pakistan, 1973 was added in 1985, which gave president the authority of dissolution of the National Assembly, thus establishing a presidential mechanism for the dismissal of elected governments without resorting to normal parliamentary procedures (Rizvi, 2000). At the same time that the constitution was changing, the Islamization program that included the Hudood Ordinances, establishment of Shariat courts, and implementation of the Zakat and Ushr systems combined religion with the state and limited the ability of secular political institutions (Hussain, 1994; Richter, 1979). The effects of these measures were twofold; on the one hand they were used to create ideologically a legitimate military government, and on the other they were used to divide potential opposition by promoting religious parties and disenfranchising others (Waseem, 1987). The non-party elections of 1985 also showed the preference of the regime for limited forms of political participation, which do not lend themselves to the re-emergence of strong party organisations (Kamran, 2009). The performance of the economy during certain periods of the 1980s was a form of social acquiescence, but institutional changes diminished the independence of parliament, judiciary and bureaucracy and entrenched the primacy of the military in the formal structure of the state (Jalal, 1990; Talbot, 1998). The difference with Zia's project and with previous military interventions was that it had an explicitly constitutional aspect: the regime was not going to simply suspend civilian institutions, but rather set the rules that would govern how they would work in the future, even in the event of a return to civilian government, the military would have had a clear say.

The constitutional and ideological aspects of this project mutually reinforced each other and proved to be very enduring. The Eighth Amendment did not just empower the President; it established a partnership between the Presidency and the military which gave each a stake in balancing the power of elected assemblies. Likewise, Islamisation was not limited to the legal arena but also pervaded educational, media and economic institutions, altering the norms of the population so as to make secular political mobilization more challenging. The establishment of religious parties as rivals to the mainstream political parties further divided the opposition, leaving no single civilian power to challenge the military power. These, taken together, made a military regime into a praetorian government, a form of government in which the military's strength was not only held in force but was also rooted in the constitutional and ideational structure of the state. These arrangements lasted long after Zia's death in 1988 and are evidence of the success of this institutional engineering, making it easy to understand why subsequent civilian governments found it so difficult to make parliamentary sovereignty a reality.

Legacies and Rethinking the Trajectory

The aftermath of the Bhutto and Zia eras has left a legacy of a political regime in which civilian government finds itself constrained, even following nominal switches to democracy. The Bhutto

years proved that democratic consolidation is not easy to achieve by merely adopting a constitution and building popular support where the exercise of power is still personalized and/or where coercive tools are employed against the opposition (Wolpert, 1993; Ahmed et al., 2020). The Zia years in turn proved that military governments can manipulate the constitutional framework, religious ideology, and peaceful elections to reorganize institutions in a manner that is more durable than the military leader himself (Shafqat, 2011). The consequences of these shifts have been repeated during various civilian governments in the country and comprise presidential dissolution powers, a weakened party system, and the strategic use of religious constituencies (Ziring, 1997). These legacies were not only institutional but moral: the recurring use of religious language to justify authoritarian rule has changed expectations around the relationship between religion and the state, and the practice of presidential dissolution has become a norm that undermines the notion that, even if a party loses the election, elected governments should be replaced by constitutional means instead of electoral contestation. The overall result was a political climate in which civilians ran provisional governments, and knew that these would be subject to the will of outside actors.

A balanced assessment, then, denies the notion that the military was the sole cause of the failure of democracy and also the idea that the 1977 intervention was simply a reaction to civilian excesses. Rather, they demonstrate a cyclical dynamic of greater civilian institutional failure that leads to more military interventions, which in turn leads to more failure of civilians to hold power. Instead, they show a process that is reinforcing, whereby the weakness of civilian institutions gives way to military intervention that further weakens civilian rule. (Jalal, 2014) This is a better described as a sick equilibrium, not just a cycle of democracy's failure and military's correction. Every stage of Bhutto's centralization, Zia's praetorian engineering and the limited governance of the civilian governments that came after them added to the conditions that allowed for praetorianism. The lack of strong political parties, the reliance of civilian officials on non-elected institutions and the entrenched intermingling of religious and political power all played a role in a political system where democracy was continually postponed. If you want to try and put a stop to the cycle, you have to understand this interdependence.

This has profound implications for modern-day Pakistan. In fact, as democratic consolidation demands not just elections, but institutionalization of civilian supremacy, addressing the legacies of the Bhutto-Zia era is not a historical issue, but a political one. The constitutional amendments that would allow the president to intervene in the country's affairs, the reinforcement of party structures that are not dependent on the leadership of individual party members and the creation of a lasting consensus on the scope of military power are yet to be completed. The history of the 1971-1988 period shows that these reforms can only be accomplished through a series of constitutional moments, as importantly, through continuous political work. The fragile civilian governments and periodic military interventions are likely to continue unless addressed at their root as structural issues, irrespective of particular electoral outcomes or the intentions of individual leaders.

Conclusion

The political evolution from Bhutto to Zia is an example of how the contradictions of a civilian government that was personalized created situations of instability that, in turn, were transformed by a military leadership into a more lasting praetorian order. Both phases failed to establish institutions strong enough to control political competition without resorting to violence and/or ideology. The long-term legacy has been a long-standing civil–military imbalance, which keeps affecting the potential for democratic consolidation. Any measure taken to enhance the power of the people must therefore not only take into account the failures of the past in party

institutionalization, but also consider structural shifts that have taken place since the military takeover, instead of merely repeating past civilian structures. The Bhutto period, in particular, proved that the absence of internal party democracy and the focus on one leader could not be made up for by constitutional achievement; and the Zia period, in particular, proved that the military rule could be consolidated through legalistic and ideological devices that would also prevail after his death. All of these lessons suggest that a dual approach is necessary for consolidation of the democratic process in Pakistan; rebuilding civilian institutions from within, and, eliminating praetorian constitutional and ideological elements.

The change of Bhutto–Zia trajectory will have consequences beyond the immediate scope of the period under consideration. It asserts that the study of democratic breakdown should not only include the time of military action but also those longer periods leading up to the military action, where institutions are eroded, and those longer periods following military action, where their structures change. Civilian institutional weakness combined with military strategic calculation in Pakistan has created an order that is very difficult to change, despite numerous changes of government over the last few decades. Civilian institutional weakness combined with military strategic calculation has created in Pakistan an order that is very difficult to change, despite numerous changes of government over the last few decades. If the trend is to be interrupted, more than just periodic elections or changing leadership will be needed to correct the underlying conditions of weak parties, judicial reliance, religious legitimization of political power, and the lack of consensus on the boundaries of civil and military power which have made praetorian interventions possible in the past. Addressing these structural conditions is the only way Pakistan can progress to a political system in which civilian rule is not just declared but actually enshrined in the system.

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