



## A Decade of Political Unrest: An Analysis of General Zia Era in Pakistan



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**Abstract** *The problem with Pakistan's democracy is not that only political institutions are weak but the interference of non-elected forces has also done havoc with it. Apart from the high handedness of civilian bureaucracy the unswerving military adventurism disrepute the political process of the country. The entry of military into the corridors of powers hit hard the final nail into the coffin of democratization in Pakistan. General Zia tactfully maneuvered his plan cashed the extreme polarization political parties proved yet another great hurdle to the survival democratic system. The paper analyzes the decade long unrest caused by the military regime of Gen. Zia. The paper also shed light on how abruptly military managed to gain superior position in the politics of the country. The immaturity that demonstrated by political setup is also the concern of this endeavor. Qualitative approach has been adopted to satisfy the puzzling queries pointed out above.*

**Key Words:** Authoritarianism, Politicians, MRD, Governance and Political Institutions

### Introduction

Political and civil disorder led to widespread unrest in the country. It is no wonder that when the PNA started its agitation, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had already lost the sympathy of a sizeable percentage of people, especially in the urban areas as a consequence of his political compromise (Qureshi, 1979). It was again unfortunate in the history of the country that military disrupted the political environment using the consequent unrest as a pretext. The then Army Chief, General Ziaul Haq seized power and declared martial law on 5<sup>th</sup> of July 1977 and suspended the 1973 constitution. He dissolved the assemblies, ordering the arrest of PPP and opposition leaders and promising elections to be held in October 1977. Priorities of the military junta then changed as was evident from subsequent pronouncements. He time and again announced the elections but elections were not conducted in his period. In his public announcements he told the reasons for the delay his main aim was to keep PPP out from power (Ali, 2008). The presence of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was not less than headache for General Ziaul Haq. He wanted to get rid of him. Zia tactfully engineered plan to trapped Bhutto in which he succeeded eventually. General Ziaul Haq overthrew the government of Z.A. Bhutto on 5<sup>th</sup> July, affirmed military rule and became Chief Martial Law Administrator. The military operation was named as Operation Fair play. Soon after the control of power, he announced that the army would in little time of 90 days hold fresh and impartial elections and will hand over power to the elected representatives. He told that the assumption of civilian rule on the part of military was not encouraging adventure and that army was in true nature favoured the system of governance to be run by the politicians who were there

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actual custodians. The citizen, exercise this right through their political leaders who are chosen in like all systems of electoral competition. The elections of 1977 were marred by massive rigging and its results were rejected. The oppositions started widespread movement against the ruling party and demanded fresh elections. Their movement gave the impression that the citizens even were of the opinion that system of democracy was not suited to Pakistan.

*“Zia told that, he genuinely felt that the survival of this country lies in democracy and democracy alone. But when the political leaders failed to rescue the country out of a crisis, it is an inexcusable sin for the armed forces to sit as silent spectators. It is primarily for this reason that the army had to intervene to save the country”.*

*“I would like to point out here that I saw no prospects of a compromise between the Peoples Party and the PNA because of their mutual distrust and lack of faith it was feared that the failure of the PNA and PPP to reach a compromise would plunge the country into a more serious crisis. This risk could not be taken in view of the larger interests of the country.” “He therefore declared, my sole aim is to organize free and fair elections which would be held in October this year (1977). Soon after the polls, power will be transferred to the elected representatives of the people. I give a solemn assurance that I will not deviate from this schedule” (Rizvi, 1984).*

But promise was not kept and General Zia hung on to power for one reason or the other for eleven long years. Rustow has pointed out that throughout the world most of the military coups immediately announced that they will not stay in power for long period and that power will be transferred to the civilian representatives soon. But few live up to that initial promise (Finkle, & Gable, 1966). Soon on the day of independence 1977 in one of his address to the nation he alarmed the leaders of the political organizations that Pakistan would soon start its march towards electoral political system and they could obstruct this process, he further added if anyone was found guilty would be given serious punishment. He told in his address that the military was keen in restoring the democratic system and they were of the view that this was vital for the country. Since, everyone obstruct this plan would not only be considered the rival of the county but also that of this system and a severe punishment would be inflicted on that person. He skillfully maneuvered and expanded the base of religious sentiments (Shafiqat, 1998).

## **A Decade of Political Unrest**

Zia's rule deteriorated the prospects of democracy in the country which were hoped to the increased participation of the peoples. Apart from it Political organizations functioned but their managerial capability remained controlled. As stated above the military rule, devastated civil liberty and freedom of opinion but the desire and aspirations for democracy cannot be suppressed. Consequently, under his tyrannical regime, strain between two opposite forces i.e., those who were supporting democracy and those who were not continued.

In 1981, the PPP took the charge of the affairs against the autocratic military dictator by bringing together leaders of different political shades to one platform and launched Movement for Restoration of Democracy (MRD). This alliance necessitated lifting of military rule and demanded for fresh polls. Its struggles against the illegitimate rule bore fruit in 1985 in the form of partial restoration of democracy. Zia recognized that despite the support he gained for his rule he could not suppress the legitimate right of the people and like his predecessor, engineered new version of controlled of democracy. The opposition political leaders particularly that of PPP, at present had been either in jail or was outside the country and in their absence he intended to form pliable legislature. He established a nominated assembly with the name of Majlis-i-Shoora (Advisory Council) in which he included his own favorite people but, as a matter of fact, it was his stopgap arrangement, constantly challenged by the civil society. For the purpose Mohammed Khan Junejo, was chosen as prime minister, his attitudes were in favor of democracy it was he who allowed Benazir Bhutto's back to Pakistan. Junejo paved the way for the parties to continue their activities in the country (Shafiqat, 1998).

At the same time, Junejo revealed a strong inclination to create the dominance of Muslim League. He maneuvered for normalizing the relationship between both the government and opposition. He was trying to restore the role of political parties in the politics of the country and strengthening the institutions, his government was dismissed on 29 May 1988 on a flimsy pretext of the worsening conditions of law and order and for working against the ideology of Pakistan and jeopardizing the unity of the nation ([Ziring, 1998](#)). As prime minister he did not received the praise for what he deserved. Above all during his brief premiership he showed tolerance to the oppositions, consensus on various issues, media was allowed and the rule of law was given respect. Zia decided to rebuild the country on the basic tenants of Islam and put a ban on the activities of political parties ([Rizvi, 1986](#)).

## Zia Initiations

The constitution that Pakistan Peoples Party had produced after a period of long constitutional dilemma, with parliamentary consensus in 1973, was amended and its original shape was tinted with addition of another clause called 58(2)(b) in the form of Eight Constitutional Amendment. With this Amendment Zia changed the Constitution to a sort of executive presidency. Originally, it recognizes parliamentary form of governance with the president as head of the state. But the Amendment empowered the president to such an extent that he can act over and above the law and can dissolve all the elected institutions without taking into account the Prime Minister.

The long military period of Zia devastated political institutions, politicians and the system of representative rule. During his regime he worked to intimidate PPP as much as possible and tried to eliminate it throughout the country. He also banned media and other source that could in any way provide information. In the absence of representative and elected institutions, the environment of Pakistan was badly nurtured with despotic tendencies which aggravated the civil society with the introduction of arms culture ([Malik, 2008](#)). He had little respect for state institutions including political parties. The most sacred institution of the state was not spared which received a very rough treatment by appointing and dismissing the judges. He was all the time busing to offset the PPP in the province of Sindh, but the mischiefs that he helped create has opened the wounds of the nation. Muttahia Quami Movement (MQM) was his gift and legacy to the nation (Khan. 2005).

Many former parliamentarians belonging to the PPP were summarily barred from public life for seven years. In addition to these wholesale convictions of the PPP politicians, serious attempts were also made by some of General Zia's colleagues in the Military Council to create a wedge between the leaders of the PPP. But the main rank and file of the PPP appears to have stood fast and remained loyal to Bhutto and his family. Only the former Minister for Information and Religious Affairs in the Bhutto cabinet, and Information Secretary of the PPP, Maulana Kausar Niazi, along with a few party members, disassociated themselves from the PPP, ostensibly protesting against the control of party affairs by the Bhutto family. These dissidents included almost all those who were accused by the PNA of committing serious irregularities in March 1977 elections. These politicians were assured by Gen. Zia that by disassociating from the PPP they might prevent the termination of their political careers and their cases would not be referred to the Disqualification Tribunals because the ruling junta had promised not to do so if they would sever their connections with the PPP. None of these dissidents was barred from public life ([Qureshi, 1979](#)).

## Transforming the State into Civilian Rule

By mid-1980s the initiatives taken by General Ziaul Haq included: holding of referendum in December 1984, the introduction of nonparty general elections in February 1985 and the Restoration of Constitutional Order in March 1985, though it was a step in legalizing his authoritarian rule, more as the General did in plodding fashion in the direction remained a proven fact of the intentions he had ([Bray, 1990](#)).

The General Zia era is marked as the worst in the history of Pakistan in general and PPP in particular. To Ashok Kapoor, he had not only derailed Pakistan's nascent democratic process but he introduced ethnic riots as well which contaminated the society. Zia, according to Kapoor had gone to the extent of damaging the original shape of the 1973 Constitution. Shifting the momentum of power in the shape of Eight Amendment and Article 58(2) (b), added in President the authority to pull out the prime minister from the parliamentary lodges on his own directives. ([Wynbrandt, 2009](#)). Apart from this, he left no stone unturned in discrediting political parties, particularly, PPP in common junta. He created suspicion and a wave of antagonism to keep the masses detached of the political activities and spent their energies for their livelihood and not to waste it in listening useless speeches and processions of the political parties. He was also aware of the fact that to stay long in the echelon of powers, he must need the support of political platform in the days to come ([Kapoor, 1991](#)).

The present weaknesses in the system were connected with the failure of the PPP and the incompetence of other platforms to improve an ideologically mass based appeal. General Ziaul Haq, who captured political control, overthrew the Zulfikar Ali Bhutto regime by imposing martial law, was enthusiastic to abolish the party as opponent. He resorted to each and every tactic to eliminate it from the political scene of the country. The party was barred, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was hanged to death all its top leadership was imprisoned, but most importantly he promoted what one observer called the localization of politics which greatly reduced PPP's general appeal in the years to come. This program of the localization of political activities started with by conducting the local bodies' polls on a non-party basis in 1979 which were intended to function as a political pressure valve and to deflect attention away from the PPP ([Hasnain, 2018](#)).

Meanwhile, General Zia was making moves that looked like transferring the government to civilians. The plan carefully articulated was smoothly put into practice, as General Zia had earlier announced on August 12, 1983 that the general elections to the National Assembly, the Provincial Assemblies and the Senate would be held by March 1985. He also announced the date for referendum on December 19, 1984 in his address to the nation on December 1, 1984. Accordingly, he held a referendum on his Islamization program which virtually provided him five years in the presidency ([Election Commission of Pakistan, \(1985\)](#)). To make his position more secure, Zia instructed his handpicked Junejo who was the product of February 1985 non party elections, to form a political party. He congregated the members of the sitting parliament in the shape of Muslim League ([Jalal, 1995](#)).

Whatever Zia's mentality regarding the parliamentary experience was, it is an established fact that he never admitted wholeheartedly democratic government and denounced political parties in his speech on 30<sup>th</sup> of December 1985. In this speech, he put an end to his long authoritarian rule under the cover of military. But, on the other hand, Prime Minister Junejo's approach was different to political conditions in the sense that he provided a positive gesture while stating that the political parties would very soon resume their activities and would have access to the electorates for the next elections ([Yousaf, 1999](#)).

### **The MRD Politics**

Martial Law regime, immediately following the imposition of military rule, initiated a vigorous movement against the leadership of PPP. Bhutto was arrested on a murder charge and was hanged, on April 4, 1979. However leading a demonstration in Lahore, the police hit Begum Nusrat Bhutto (Widow of ZA Bhutto) on her head who was elected as the Acting Chairperson of the party following the arrest of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in September 1977. Benazir Bhutto (daughter of ZA Bhutto) who was elected as Co-Chairperson of the party, after Begum Nusrat Bhutto disqualification in February, 1978, suffered impairment in hearing during imprisonment. A large number of party supporter were put to death, many suffered injuries and imprisonment. Also women faced such conditions. Despite temptations by the Martial Law authorities no single PPP supporter betrayed the party. PPP, despite mysterious suppression survived and expanded in strength. The party's supporters confirmed their commitment to fight against the forces of

dictatorship. Those who had become alienated from the party again reunited which enhanced the party support. The progressive forces cooperated with the party openly.

The leadership of Nusrat Bhutto and Benazir Bhutto gave it a renewed sense. These political influence, suppression, and control could not eliminate Bhutto's image or the mass backing for his party and Benazir Bhutto kept her father's legacy alive. Though young and enduring incarceration and left in exile, Benazir Bhutto had been active in politics as the most outspoken and noticeable opposition leader for more than eleven years and this period had largely shaped her leadership qualities. On more than one occasion, Benazir Bhutto had demonstrated pragmatism and a non-ideological attitude to national issues. She had also shown the ability, without compromising her principles, to work together with various political groups within a democratic framework (Interview, 2015).

Now to get rid of Gen. Zia, they sorted the solutions in attacking the adversary with a full force by combining under the umbrella of an alliance. This alliance of nine political organizations with those which had assisted in its dismissal as members of the PNA, integrated in Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD) on February 6, 1981. Hamid Khan argue that would work both for bringing an end to military rule and for holding free and fair elections under the Constitution of 1973 (Khan, 2005). The alliance proved to be a source in the unification of the political parties. The party's importance in the politics of Pakistan aroused when it acquired a leading position in MRD. It demanded for the restoration of constitution to its original status, the road toward parliamentary elections, to end oppressive rule of martial law and transfer of power to the elected representatives on priority basis (Interview, 2015). The Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD) opposed Ziaul Haq's plan for Islamization of the country on the ground that the 1973 Constitution provided adequate Islamic flavor. Instead, it focused on to restore the 1973 Constitution to its original shape and provides provincial autonomy. Ziaul Haq responded to the argument in 1983, when he declared a schedule of local government polls and few martial law regulations (Kapoor, 1991).

After few years, MRD launched a new movement on 14th August 1983 and Benazir participated in the movement from jail. In this movement not only the people participated from urban centers but rural areas as well, because the movement was strong in Sindh as compare to the remaining provinces. It proved as the highest danger to Zia regime when Pakistan Peoples Party took the responsibility for commanding the Movement of democracy in 1983 that was started to remove Zia (Lamb, 1991). The MRD, as result of the government failure in 1983, took its supporters out to the streets of Sindh province to challenge the military rule. At the same time, by overwhelming political forces such as the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy, Zia's government spawned atrocities that turned Karachi and Hyderabad into a boiling ethnic cauldron. In 1985, General Ziaul Haq had decided to bring back political activities in Pakistan as a result of the pressure from political forces especially from PPP in challenging the military regime through the MRD in 1983 (Yasmin, 1994). On February 21, 1985, PPP called for a boycott of the non-party general elections and referendum on the grounds that both were in contrast to democratic spirit of the 1973 Constitution (Chadda, 2000).

Benazir's arrival in 1986, brought, once again, thousands of supporters into the streets and she responded to them by declaring her mission i.e., the removal of Ziaul Haq and the restoration of democracy. The opposition then formed the Awami (People's) Movement and selected Benazir as their leader. Her appearance in Karachi on April 10, 1986 produced crowds not seen since the days of Quaid-i-Azam. Recognizing a tide of support in her favor, Benazir reserved all her criticism for President Zia and said nothing about Junejo or the Muslim League. Using a strategy that was intended to isolate the President, the daughter of the martyred Bhutto anticipated putting together a political coalition that would guarantee her success in the forthcoming elections (Ziring, 2003).

On the other hand, for safeguarding his position General Zia pushed Pakistan into a situation of uncertainty. Nobody knew his fate even once anybody left home in the morning whether he will return home or not. The situations had become worsened to the extent that killing and

butchering became the order of the day. Even the fire that was lit by General Zia in the shape of Sunni Shia conflicts took whole the country into its lap.

In spite of all those diverse political situations, Benazir Bhutto started in organizing the party because during the latter part of Junejo period. The party was greatly surrounded by interior problems, the dismissal of Jahangir Badar as the head of the party in the Punjab reflected such problems. Considerable opposition had grown to him in the party; some criticized him for being conservative, while few did not respect his experience and viewed him as a political upstart, charging his rise to Benazir's favoritism. Members like Rao Rashid, openly criticized Benazir political posture. She had reversed party policy in some key areas, stopped further nationalization of industries, removing land reform from the agenda of the party and shifting external policy in the direction favorable more to America. The PPP supporters openly questioned the sense of this policy shift. Such disputes and disagreement inside PPP was the creation of continuous obstructions. The party was defeated in the local body elections of 1987 and even unsuccessful to gain a by-elections seat to the National Assembly ([Noman, 1989](#)).

Although it was a tough and tedious task to get the flavor of the voters in such an uncertain political scenario yet Benazir Bhutto made it possible. But the initial stage especially in the elections of local bodies in November 1987, the party had suffered a serious blow ([Doherty, & Doherty, 1990](#)).

The drift in the relationships between General Ziaul Haq and Prime Minister Junejo came to surface from the time when the latter started asserting his position and authority. The prime minister was aware of his position as he was having the backing of parliament. In this regard, he felt himself more secure than before and started asserting his position and authority as champion of democratic rights and liberties of the people, the freedom of press and removal of restrictions imposed on political parties ([Ahmad, 2005](#)). Two of the events stood instrumental in fissuring these relationships. First, the Prime Minister, Junejo convened an All Parties Conference on Afghan Settlement that was attended by the leaders of all parties especially PPP's Benazir Bhutto without informing and consulting General Zia which the latter vehemently opposed. Secondly, the stance of Junejo on Geneva Accords exacerbated the situations, and this created a sense of uneasiness inside the Presidency ([Rais, 1989](#)).

As Mushtaq Ahmad pointed out, it was not possible to control democracy by dictatorial devices. That was what the late president had attempted to do by literally outlawing the political parties, packing the parliament with members who had no party affiliation and appointing a prime minister who, he thought, would be his yes man ([Ahmad, 2005](#)). Ziaul Haq dismissed the increasingly assertive Mohammad Khan Junejo by using his authority under the amended constitution three years later. He tried to impose his will in certain matters especially in the promotions in military and tried to reduce defense expenses ([Giunchi, 2011](#)). On May 29, 1988 Ziaul Haq dismissed his handpicked protege Muhammad Khan Junejo and dissolved the National Assembly of Pakistan on the allegations of corruptions, worst law and order situations and slow process of Islamization. *"A few days before his death, while revealing his plans for a presidential system, he told a confidante I will be around you a long time. But fate intervened on 17th August, 1988 when the C-130, carrying him crashed"* ([Aziz, 2009](#)). His death changed the political scene of the country and his supporters were left in total disarray.

### **Death of General Zia and the Restoration of Democracy**

The Pakistan Muslim League was re-energized by supporters of the ruling military elite and had been governing the country long before its changeover to political leadership. The party, on the other hand, was considered as the main rival to military rule and military junta could only participate in the election and form government if the system was, at the time, democratic. If the ruling party could side with any one i.e., the army or political leadership, its thoughts concerning democratic system were reasonably uncertain. The above stated measures clearly depict Desch's observation that, the military can gain larger control by playing them against one another when

civilian elites are divided. General Zia's policy of 'nonparty elections' damaged political parties in the country, resulting in the failure of the party in attaining greater number of seats in the elections.

Saeed Shafqat observed that the departing rulers conducted the election bearing in mind the fact that the opposition especially the PPP was weak enough and would not get that many votes in the elections ([Shafqat, 1998](#)). The Army high command understood that the difference among the political parties would be advantageous to them if they could weaken the new setup by internal cleavage then it would have fewer chances to flourish. These leaders not permitted parties to organize themselves efficiently, by holding elections to take place so quickly that wanted to reduce the chances of effective political compromise. They understood that the former General had done havoc with the political system and the country to greater extent was polarized ([Ziring, 2003](#)). After the death of Zia, Ghulam Ishaq Khan, Chairman of the Senate became the president of Pakistan, as per the amended constitution, on August 17, 1988. He established an Emergency Council immediately and became the head of the state and decided to hold fresh polls, with full involvement of political parties in November 1988. However, he knew besides his experiences being a bureaucrat by serving under many presidents in the country that public aspiration for the fresh elections could not be stopped. In his address to the nation, Ghulam Ishaq Khan assured that his government firmly believed in democracy and will continue to march on its road with determination. Although, President Ghulam Ishaq Khan had shown his determinations to restore democracy in Pakistan, yet the problem for the political parties was the issue of elections on nonparty basis. Gen. Zia had declared (on July 21, 1988) in a press conference that elections to the national and provincial assemblies would be on non-party basis. This puzzled the political leaders of all platforms including Benazir Bhutto of PPP. The stance of Pakistan Peoples Party was loud and clear as its leader sensed overwhelming support for party inside peoples. However, Benazir Bhutto filed a petition in the Supreme Court of Pakistan requesting the latter to direct the Federation of Pakistan and Chief Election Commissioner to hold the elections on party basis (the Dawn, August 18, 1988).

In Pakistan the opposition was demanding the participation of political parties in the elections prior to that, demonstrations and street riots were observed against Zia's military regime for the restoration of democracy in Pakistan. To compel the authoritarian tendency of General Zia and to restore democracy, the will of the people was the agenda of the opposition for which they used each and every tactic. But this time the MRD had demanded elections on party basis to end the stalemate and to put the country back on democratic track. Frontline leaders of the MRD while addressing a big public meeting appealed to the nation to forge complete unity in its ranks and files to fight against the dictatorial rule (the Dawn, August 12, 1988). However, on October 2, 1988, the historic decision came from the Supreme Court of Pakistan in response to the petitions filed on August 1, 1988 by the co-chairperson of PPP against the decision of late General Zia that the elections would be held on non-party basis. The Supreme Court gave its judgment in favor of the political organizations. The Court decisions have released a tremendous amount of popular energies and enthusiasm all over the country for the exercise of the franchise ([Oldenburg, \(2010\)](#)).

The post Zia military bureaucracy had been playing a key role in Pakistan's politics. The most important development was the establishment of IJI by military in 1988 which was founded to counter PPP's substantial campaigns in the elections to reduce the predictable success of Pakistan Peoples Party. The establishment worked for the reconsolidation of Pakistan Muslim League's two offshoots and invited other political parties to join PML and form an electoral alliance named the Islami Jamhuri Ittehad (IJI). The establishment was busy from behind to bring together the opposing PPP elements and worked as much as possible to help the IJI in the elections. Later on, such types of activities of establishment were continued for breaking the affiliation of PPP parliamentarians from National and Provincial Assemblies from the party.

## Conclusion

The regime of Gen. Zia was one of the lengthiest of martial law rule in Pakistan. Zia imposition of

martial law not only curtailed the prospect of democracy but also raised questions over the weak and vulnerable political institutions of the country. Democratic process was just started spreading its roots when this undesirable step was taken by Gen. Zia. He like his predecessors not only delayed peoples rights to participate in the elections but also maneuvered by misshaping the original document of the 1973 constitutions of Pakistan. The introduction of a notorious clause to the constitution reduced the powers of elected prime minister and he was made subservient to the president. Besides, he restricted all type of political activities for a longer period which virtually overshadowed democratic governance. His rule according to some scholars has introduced drugs and Kalashnikov culture to the country. The functions of political parties and politicians was barred for not less than a decade prove a fatal blow for the already nascent system of democracy.



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