

Government-oppositions Relations during First Term of Benazir Bhutto as Prime Minister

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Abstract

In democracy the strength of the state institutions depends on the relationship among central government with opposition and with provincial governments. Pakistan consists of a centre and four federating units having mix nationalities. The relationship among the ruling party in the centre with opposition and the governments in provinces most of the time remained unpleasant and unfriendly. It is argued that personal rather the national considerations augmented confrontation and conflict among national and regional level political leaders. This paper investigates the factors which have provoked politics of confrontation both within the parliament between ruling and opposition party and with provincial governments especially Punjab during Benazir Bhutto's first term in office as prime minister. To find answers to these questions, secondary data has been utilized and to supplement this, newspapers have been consulted as well. This paper gives a detailed account of the reasons of politics of confrontation during PPP first tenure in government.

Keywords: Democracy, Political Parties, Ruling Party and Confrontational Politics

Introduction

Democracy, political parties and elections are interconnected. Political parties are an important component of a democratic process and without strong political parties no democracy can function in the true sense of the term (Hofmeister & Karsten, 2011). Democracy is a suitable form of government particularly for a multi-ethnic society like Pakistan. The legitimacy of democracy is accepted throughout the world. Most countries of the world are moving towards the adoption of this system. Some are more developed, some are in the process of making (Khan, 2016) and the experiences in the developed world reveal that the system has proved its worth in the developed world. Pakistan being a developing country could not become democratic in real sense. Besides other political platforms Pakistan

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Peoples Party (PPP) is the most responsible party for fledgling democracy in Pakistan. Though it had expressed its commitments to democracy time and again but fell short in its practical manifestations. Therefore, it is essential to evaluate its role in strengthening democracy in the country is of vital importance.

Pakistan's democratic stunt in post Ziaul Haq's era attracted attention of the scholars towards analysing the role of PPP. In addition, role of the opposition party i.e., Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (IJI) led by Nawaz Sharif in Centre and Punjabis also analysed. The period under study has distinctive characteristics because the party based general elections in November 1988 put the country back on the path of democracy. Unfortunately, this could not sustain due to the rivalry for political ascendancy ignoring the needs of embryonic democratic structure that the country had got after a long span of military rule (1977-1988). It is significant to understand the politics of Pakistan because of the politician's overt and covert commitments to democracy and Pakistan's most popular platform PPP's role.

Literature Review

The proposed study warrants consideration in that it seeks to examine the role of PPP for the development of democracy (people's rule) and the extent to which it availed the opportunities to make good her past mistakes in government. Saeed Shafqat focused on the dynamism in Benazir Bhutto leadership. Being a popular leader; Benazir Bhutto played a significant role in national politics, both in government as well as in opposition. The Party under her leadership, held intra party elections, which was a clear indication of her commitment towards democracy and Peoples rule (Shafqat, 1998). The PPP's coming into power through the elections of 1988 and the subsequent events that had attracted scholarly attentions needs to be explored. Unfortunately the civilian leaders could not honor the commitment they made prior to the restoration of democratic rule and this caused an irreparable damage to the health of nascent democratic culture of the country (Wynbrandt, 2009).

Kapoor has also pinpointed the lacuna and political will of the politicians to transform the state into a democratic polity. It is revealed from the continuous infighting among politicians for lucrative positions. This sowed the seeds of selfishness and corruption in Pakistan (Kapur, 1991). Burki calls it a period of skirmishes among different rival forces in the country. He has pointed out that while coming into high echelon, the politicians indulged in grabbing and accumulating all the powers in themselves. In doing so, they were unaware

of the repercussions. Interrupting other's ambit of power time and again virtually provided ample opportunity to the rival covert and overt forces. As a result of this non democratic approach of Pakistani political elites, an irreparable damaged has been caused to the democratic culture of the country which would take a long time to recover from (Burki, 2006).

Methods and Material

In this research, mostly qualitative tools are used to determine various dimensions and depths of this study. Both historical and descriptive methods are used looking to the nature of the study. In order to collect the relevant information, both primary and secondary sources were used. Among secondary sources books more relevant written by different scholars (Pakistani as well as foreigner) directly related to this study were analysed. Apart from it, books having chapters on this period were also utilized to get more insight and strengthen this work. Furthermore, online journals and magazines and reputable national newspapers were consulted for the purpose of data collection. In addition to these, internet and other electronic sources were utilized to get the most reliable data out of it. Interviews conducted with various stack holders influencing this time period during field work were incorporated to enhance the authenticity of this study.

Analysis and Discussion

Benazir's Strategies of Cooperation

Benazir Bhutto and other stalwarts of PPP were pitted against General Ziaul Haq's supporters. The latter were united against PPP and were involved in all kind of intolerable mudslinging campaigns against her person which was never seen in Pakistan before. However, at that challenging time, she remained focused on her electioneering and calling upon the masses to cast their vote in favour of PPP. Consequently, her party had got victorious in the elections by obtaining majority seats in the national assembly (Jajdi, 2011).

In view of the elections results, PPP was hardly able to form coalition government in the centre. However, keeping the required majority in the House, President Ghulam Ishaq Khan called upon Benazir Bhutto for the formation of government, the first woman to govern a Muslim State (The Nation, December 13, 2013). A slight numerical superiority in the general elections of October 1988 i.e. 94 seats in the House of 217, enabled Pakistan Peoples

Party (PPP) to form coalition government with likeminded parties at the centre and provinces except that of the Punjab. In Punjab, the rival Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (IJI), an alliance of heterogeneous political parties with Pakistan Muslim League as the largest constituent, was able to form government (Mehmood, 2003). Still, the post Ziaul Haq Pakistan could not be called Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan because she did not dominate Pakistani power relations even though she was the elected head of the government. Benazir Bhutto had to share power with a number of stakeholders i.e., with the president and military. President Ghulam Ishaq Khan was a pro Ziaul Haq and a pro-Army former civil servant. General Aslam Baig, the Army Chief was as the history shows, the centre of power in Pakistan (Khan, 2015).

The new political administration led by Benazir Bhutto, was extremely divided before assuming office. Punjab, the most populous province had already gone into the hands of IJI under Nawaz Sharif as its Chief Minister. He was an arch political rival of Benazir Bhutto. He is known as an ideological heir of Ziaul Haq. The regional politicians in Sindh and Balochistan, who sought provincial autonomy, thought that Benazir Bhutto was weak. The circumstances, in which Benazir Bhutto became Prime Minister with a split mandate in the Parliament,¹ made her bound to compromise various political goals (Sirohey, 2000). Moreover, the death of President Ziaul Haq in August 1988 had also paved the way for the emergence of a "troika." The agreement, reached under the pressure, confirmed the powers of the military and overall controllers of the politics (Aziz, 2009). Benazir Bhutto avoided asserting her powers as a premier, at least, those related to the professional and corporate interests of the military and the defence issues. Therefore, the coalition government of PPP started with Benazir Bhutto as Prime Minister with her hands tied, and in the presence of an assertive Army Chief, ready for taking an opportunity that could become a base for removal of her government (Aziz, 2009). PPP's leadership got an opportunity to take a leading role in promoting the politics of compromise and understanding in the country. For this purpose Benazir Bhutto's adopted conciliatory attitude towards presidency when she extended her party support for acting President Ghulam Ishaq Khan in the December 1988 presidential elections. PPP leadership in general and Benazir Bhutto in particular had sensed that the politics of confrontation had benefited the military bureaucratic oligarchy in the past.

¹In order to form government, the PPP needed 104 more seats in the House of 207.

At the outset of her rule Benazir Bhutto opted for the path of pacifying politics towards opponent political parties including IJI led by Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif. She admirably sorted out differences between Muhajir and Sindh leadership. PPP's leadership was also able to convince Awami National Party (ANP) which was an arch rival of PPP in the mid-1970s, to share government with PPP in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (then NWFP)(Khan, 2016).

However, all these measures did not favour Benazir Bhutto and soon cleavage surfaced in the relationship of various stakeholders in the corridors of powers. Personal interests overshadowed national interests which inadvertently deteriorated smooth functioning of democracy in Pakistan. To benefit oneself from already maligned situation, everyone tried their best to sail in the direction of wind.

Politics of Confrontation

The dilemma in the politics of Pakistan is that the politicians do not show flexibility while dealing with matters of national importance. Democracy under the elected government had been restored in Pakistan but the old political divides had not closed. The November 1988 elections produced two more or less equally strong political groupings, the PPP and the IJI. Benazir Bhutto started her prime minister-ship with great public expectations after being elected. Benazir Bhutto was young, determined and might be loyal to her aim of promoting democracy. However, the office of prime minister proved to be a tough job for her due to the serious challenges.

Hardly a month had passed since the PPP rule began that the strains between the government and opposition had become a routine and tended to increase with each passing day. In such a situation, when the country had just started a democratic journey, the opposition parties were required to display great patience and prudence towards the newly installed elected government. The opposition parties were not ready to spend five years on the opposition benches and allow the government to complete its term with an ease.

IJI was committed, not to allow the government to work peacefully. The opposition parties worked to dislodge the PPP coalition government by not allowing the smooth functioning of the latter while the incumbent government used every possible opportunity to weaken the former. Lack of patience and lack of political maturity masked the legislature

(The Dawn, February 5, 1989). Moreover, since the clash between PPP government and the Chief Minister Nawaz Sharif raged on. The former also could not contribute to pass any significant piece of legislation in the parliament. President Ghulam Ishaq Khan was always dragging his feet to sign the ordinances and declared that an elected government should pass the laws through the legislative procedure (The Dawn, February 5, 1989).

Nonetheless, Benazir Bhutto government was successful in passing the annual budget for 1989-1990 from the parliament. As Benazir Bhutto completed her first year in office, the political situation in Pakistan remained unsettled. In the following months, Benazir Bhutto style of politics became the target of opposition's criticism. The incumbent government allies i.e., Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) and Awami National Party (ANP) left the alliance one by one that gave PPP a tough time in the National Assembly. The loss of allies support in the parliament on one hand, if weakened PPP position then on the other, provided an opportunity to the Combined Opposition Parties (COP) (Aziz, 2009) to move forward with a no confidence motion against PPP government (Aziz, 2009).

Rumours had circulated a week preceding the vote of no-confidence, claiming that members of the National Assembly were offered money to switch sides. To defeat each other, both the IJI and Benazir Bhutto's government tried their level best in buying off the loyalties of the MNAs (Mehmood, 2003). Operation '*Mid Night Jackals*' was conducted by the ISI to earn loyalties of MNAs of ruling PPP (The Nation, September 30, 1992). PPP's leadership differences with president had made her worried about her government defeat in the no-confidence move. She distrusted the president and doubted that the President had extended his support against her government in the move. However, the COP move was defeated in the National Assembly (The Nation, November 2, 1989).

Once the attempted parliamentary coup against her government failed, Benazir Bhutto alleged that if her government was defeated in the parliament, the opposition leaders had a plan to arrest her and the top 1000 leaders of her party (Chowdhury, 2003). Though, Benazir Bhutto survived no-confidence move yet, failed to build consensus based environment for all the political forces to work in. Thus political environment of the country remained weak and shaky in the days to come. She did not make significant efforts to enter into negotiations with the rivals (Malik, 2008).

PPP was surrounded by troubles as reported in the media. The army particularly the intelligence agencies remained active to decrease and further erode the confidence of the masses in the Prime Minister (Ziring, 1990). However, General Mirza Aslam Baig, the Army Chief had tried to avoid an open enmity with Benazir Bhutto. He remained neutral and expressed his support for the democratic and constitutional processes. He had even turned down the request of Nawaz Sharif to have a meeting prior to the voting on the no-confidence motion (Ziring, 1990). However, the public statement of the Army Chief for disapproval in this regard and the worsening relations of federal government with the provinces remained a matter of high concern for the prime minister in days to follow (Rizvi, 2003).

The open call of Nawaz Sharif to the President and the military establishment for intervention in the politics and support in stabilizing strife-torn or disorderly conditions had reminded of the authoritarian patterns experienced during the General Ziaul Haq era. Moreover, Pakistan witnessed an era of weak democracy where leaders focused on their rivals than on solving the country's real issues and problems (Aslam, 1989). On the political front, the Pashtun-dominated ANP, the Balochistan National Alliance (BNA) and the MQM, all seemed to believe that their lot was more secure in a loose alliance either with the PPP or the IJI. None of these regional parties, however, attempted to provoke military intervention. The dominant political parties always secured their self-interest. However, MQM got embarrassment when the government of Benazir Bhutto successfully survived when IJI secured only 107 against 119 votes to make the move successful (The Nation, November 2, 1989).

The personal conflicts with the president regarding the management of governmental affairs led some of Benazir Bhutto's supporters to believe that President Ghulam Ishaq Khan was siding with the IJI and was hardly a neutral figure. The failure of no-confidence move left Benazir Bhutto's authority as prime minister intact. However, it also increased the already widening gulf between Ghulam Ishaq Khan and Benazir Bhutto. This really proved to be a clash of personalities that intensified the on-going struggle between the forces representing the administrative state and those speaking for the political state. In this scenario, the military controlled the outcome and had opted for the status quo i.e., the democratic process to continue. However, the later developments proved to be otherwise.

No doubt, Benazir Bhutto's cabinet was consisting of young and inexperienced ministers. Another hard luck which chased her was to accommodate her family members in the prestigious offices. The position of senior minister was allocated to Begum Nusrat Bhutto, the then PPP Co-chairperson, MNA and mother of Benazir Bhutto. Moreover, taking undue advantage of his wife's position, Asif Ali Zardari resorted to an assertive approach in the decision making processes. He was also blamed for his alleged involvement in high level financial embezzlements(The Nation, November 2, 1989).It was affecting Benazir Bhutto's assertion to perform as a sincere public servant (Ziring, 2006).Allegations of corruption, political patronage and personal animus against political opponents further damaged her political posture. Thus the stains of corruption and nepotism became one of the main charges when her government was dismissed by President Ghulam Ishaq Khan latter in 1990 (The Nation, August 7, 1990).

Confrontations with Punjab Provincial Governemnt

No doubt, the IJI was established with the efforts of ISI and Nawaz Sharif was also the product of General Ziaul Haq military regime. Punjab, the largest province in Pakistan had an IJI led government with Nawaz Sharif as chief minister. Nonetheless, control over the largest federating unit by the IJI, an opposition party became a test case for Pakistan People Party's leadership as to what extent they believed in political tolerance, rule of law and respect for majority rule. Seen in this context, everyone in the corridor of powers was failing to demonstrate tolerance. It was a high time for dialogue and negotiations but the leadership from both sides did not show any sign of patience. They did not realize the seriousness of the situations and did not play a responsible role to let the ship of democracy to sail smoothly.

IJI had an uneasy relationship with PPP government at the centre due to old political rivalries. In December 1988, the meeting of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif minimized the level of hostile relations for the time being but clash existed as both of them had high stakes in dominating the politics of Punjab. For PPP, a strong political base in this populist province would have strengthened its position at the centre. At the same time, however, a strong opposition government would have helped draw the boundaries that have been ambiguous between the central and the provincial governments (Rais, 1988).

Thus efforts were made by the federal government to take over the Punjab government in persuading dozens members of the IJI government. This failed attempt was the

first serious blunder which had a lasting effect on Pakistani politics and the democratic system in the years to come. The conditions of mutual suspicion had tarnished the relationship between PPP government and the IJI which made the party in power not to lose any opportunity to remove the IJI dominated rule in Punjab and the latter with harsh intentions to disfigure, defaming, attacking and discrediting the ruling party at the centre (Arif, 1992). Different issues, for example, the Balochistan and the Centre-Punjab relations had remained critical between the government and opposition throughout these twenty two months. Deliberately such situations developed in which both the opposition government in Punjab and federal government did not let each other to work freely.

Besides, the PPP government deliberately violated the norms of democracy by keeping out opposition chief ministers i.e., Punjab and Balochistan in issues relating to national importance. Similarly, both these provinces had got a marginal share in the implementation of the Peoples Work Program (PWP) which was run through parallel machinery, mostly under the district heads of the PPP (Arif, 1992). It had to face harsh opposition from the IJI, an alliance congregated by military establishment. The formation of this alliance aimed to ensure a strong opposition to the incumbent PPP government, even if the military itself would not directly interfere. Some of Benazir Bhutto's decisions enabled her to deal with the problems she was facing i.e., strained relations with IJI, opposition and the military establishment (Benazir Bhutto became Prime Minister, June 1, 2003).

There was general expectation that PPP would complete its mandated period but the opposition parties particularly the IJI created hurdles and did not comply with the centre. Reference may also be made to a letter of Punjab chief minister urging the president to stop Benazir Bhutto from indulging in anti-state activities (Arif, 1992). The Peoples Work Program (PWP) which the PPP government had started to uplift and to a greater extent minimize the miseries of underprivileged sector of the society did not come up with the expectations. Involvement in corrupt activities and mishandling of public money in PWP was another issue on which president's intervention was sought by the non-PPP provincial governments.

A tug of war had started in which Nawaz Sharif openly defied all central government initiatives and presented himself as the protector of Punjab interests. He vehemently opposed developmental projects pursued under Benazir Bhutto government's Peoples Work Program

(PWP) (Kalia, 2001). In retaliation PPP members staged a walkout from the Assembly with the intention of causing financial problems for the provincial government when the IJI government in Punjab presented its supplementary budget (Kalia, 2001). Benazir Bhutto also rejected Punjab government's call for a meeting of the Council of Common Interests (CCI) to solve financial matters among the provinces and the federal government.

A more damaging aspect of these endeavours was the indirect support of the military establishment to IJI. Thus its backing benefited Nawaz Sharif further by intensifying a campaign of confrontational politics against the PPP coalition government at the centre. This situation thereby further weakened the already troubled democracy in Pakistan (Talbot, 2003). Benazir Bhutto government's weak position at the centre led to its dependence on the military as a stabilising and influencing force. Thus, deflecting its' attentions and energies to take adequate steps for solution of pressing issues both at national and regional levels. However, the federal government of Benazir Bhutto used full powers and resources in order to assert its authority in Punjab. The IJI government in Punjab fully resisted and came out in open confrontation thereby refusing to follow the orders of the central government. This resulted in bypassing all the constitutional prerogatives of the central government (Aziz, 2009). The provincial government in the Punjab even refused to extend an official protocol to the prime minister during her visit to the province (Ziring, 1990). Nevertheless, all the negative strategies of confrontation, retaliation, competition and meanness were adopted in this controversy between the federal and Punjab governments (Kukreja, 2003).

Keeping in view the problems of prime minister with the IJI government in Punjab, none of these developments made the task of young prime minister easier. Therefore, during the confrontational politics between the federal government of Benazir Bhutto and the IJI provincial government, both the President and the Army Chief provided full support to Nawaz Sharif (Rizvi, 2009). In fact, they made it even more imperative that Benazir Bhutto had to work in close harmony with the Army. She damaged her credibility further by becoming a partisan prime minister (The Dawan, October 10, 1994). In doing so, Benazir Bhutto had convinced herself that she was not only safeguarding the integrity of Pakistan but she had also prevented the military from playing a more direct role in the politics of Pakistan. The negative impact on the consolidation of democracy was that the leadership of two main

political parties lacked trust on each other that did not let them to work together in peace and harmony and form an effective alliance both against the president and the military.

PPP Relations with MQM in Sindh

With the support of MQM which had 13 National Assembly seats, PPP formed government in the Centre as well as in the province of Sindh (The Dawan, October 10, 1994). This arrangement of alliance with MQM in which PPP had an upper hand, remained a great hurdle in the successful working in the parliament. Moreover, the alliance with the MQM damaged her credibility within the party particularly among the Sindhi nationalists who were among her strongest supporters. Due to political exigency an agreement was signed in December 1988 between the MQM and PPP (Aziz, 2009). Accordingly, it was pledged to protect the interests of Sindhis regardless of language, religion or origin as well as to stamp out violence and to support the rule of law. The agreement proved short-lived as it could not accomplish the desired objectives i.e., to bring peace and assistance among the Sindhis and the Muhajirs in Sindh.

The MQM had raised objections about the government because of the quota system and PPP was rooted among the rural population in Sindh. As a leader of Muhajirs, Altaf Hussain along with his followers was not in good terms with the Pashtun community, Punjabi and Baloch in Karachi because local political power seemed to be slipping away from the Muhajirs. Finding its case on Muhajir persecution, MQM formed its own mercenaries and fought battles in the increasingly separated areas in Karachi. This adversely affected the law and order situation in largest city and economic hub of the country.

To add fuel to the fire, Nawaz Sharif tried to persuade MQM leadership mainly to weaken PPP's government in Sindh. The cases of various natures came to the front in Karachi. Thus the city witnessed sporadic cases of mysterious assassinations, and ethnic tussles. The said situation provided opportunities to Nawaz Sharif to criticize the government for its inability to handle the situations (Malik, 2008).

The MQM, even sought the support of army chief to interfere in Karachi which meant that the PPP in Sindh was incapable of stopping the violence. The PPP government, therefore, tried to punish the perpetrators, launched an armed action against them in which casualties were reported and at least 30 people were killed. Altaf Hussain accused Benazir

Bhutto of backstabbing and blamed her for working against the agreement. Such conditions hastened secret negotiations between the MQM and Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto was a common target. With this, a new development took place as MQM formally joined the IJI which had grown into a larger alliance called the Combined Opposition Parties (COP) determined to bring down the PPP government.

The case of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (then NWFP) was no different because in the presence of a powerful President and Army Chief Mirza Aslam Baig, the federal government could hardly take any independent decision. Despite repeated demands of PPP provincial government's coalition partner (ANP) to fulfil the commitment, Benazir Bhutto could not replace the Governor of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In fact, he was a retired Brigadier from Army and was appointed by General ZiaulHaq(Khan, 2015). Ghulam Ishaq Khan and Mirza Aslam Baig proved to be the real hurdles for the elected government of Benazir Bhutto to replace him (Rizvi, 2003).

Conclusion

As mentioned earlier political parties are the integral part of democracy. Particularly in case of representative government organized political parties are of great importance and the government cannot function in absence of the parties. The party/parties that win elections form the government and the other parties form the opposition. It is the responsibility of the political parties to stabilize political process in the country. The party in power perform its responsibilities with maturity and responsiveness and the opposition keeps a close watch on working and activities of the party in power. It is common in democratic set up that if incumbent party initiate any ill-advised policies or program it is thrown off the power and the opposition takes over the administration. The opposition also presents a viable alternative program of its own. If so, both ruling as well opposition political parties are contributing to the stability of government and consolidation of democracy. Unfortunately, it was something missing during the first term of Benazir Bhutto.

The PPP regained in power under the leadership of Benazir Bhutto after 12 years of military rule, however, the transition to civilian rule proved a bitter experience not only for democracy but for PPP as well. It was an opportunity for the party to rectify the mistakes committed in the past and get better its image in public and improve its vote bank by playing the game according to the rules. It would have also set healthy traditions in the national

politics. But positive change could be seen in its style of politics especially dealing with opposition in the parliament and in the provinces as well. Resultantly, PPP lost the opportunity for the second time since its birth in 1967. The practices which PPP resorted to were in sharp contrast to the commitment which its leader had been pronouncing so loudly in public earlier.

The IJI remained a major contender throughout the PPP government. This was the reason that throughout the rule, the PPP faced considerable impediments from the opposition and thus caused damage to democracy in Pakistan. Benazir Bhutto created troubles for her government by clashing with Nawaz Sharif in Punjab as well as with other provinces and particularly with MQM in Sindh. Apart from this, other political parties of Pakistan were equally responsible for the flimsy state of democracy as they did not play their part for promoting democracy in the country. The blatant violation of rule of the game produced a dreadful result when the decision of president Ghulam Ishaq Khan removed everyone from the political scene after their remaining in power merely for one third of the mandated period.

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