

# **Pakistan: Farewell to 1968. The Timidity of the PPP and the End of Bhuttoism**

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**The leaders of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) have had a recent string of luck, including Asif Ali Zardari's acquittal from corruption cases. This comes as a point of departure from the party's conflictive relationship with the political elite and its servants in the administration. This change in fortune has also generated suspicion that the party leadership has dropped its traditional opposition to the country's powerful establishment in exchange for relief through the courts. We have no way to verify such speculation, but it does reflect the sentiment that the PPP's timidness on the political stage signals a shift in the nature of the party.**

From Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's judicial murder to Yousuf Raza Gilani's dismissal through the courts, the Pakistan People's Party has had a tortured relationship with state institutions. Benazir Bhutto and Asif Ali Zardari were repeatedly imprisoned and exiled in their political careers. Add to that the countless, and often nameless, PPP activists who endured the worst excesses of military regimes, and we understand the persistent antagonism between the party and sections of the state.

The PPP's emergence as a political force in the late 1960s was a major disruption in the elite-centred political culture of Pakistan. Not only did the party lead a popular campaign against Ayub Khan's dictatorship, propelled by an explosive combination of the working class and students, but it did so on an ideological agenda. ZAB's calls for the introduction of 'Islamic socialism' was consistent with the 'Third World Populism' in the era, and won him a broad range of supporters in the country. The constitution of Pakistan formed during the PPP government contains traces of this mass upheaval, with constitutional guarantees for issues such as employment and housing, themes that curiously remain missing in debates around the constitution.

There has always been an enormous debate on the merits and failures of the Bhutto regime. What is beyond doubt, however, is the mythical stature acquired by ZAB in the eyes of the public after the overthrow of his government, and his subsequent hanging. For my parents' generation, which was politicised under the Zia dictatorship, Bhutto's death was not simply another unfortunate event in Pakistan's political history. The sheer arrogance of murdering a popularly-elected leader was considered a personal insult. The deep sympathy for Benazir Bhutto and Nusrat Bhutto also stemmed from the images of despair and resistance that these two iconic women stood for.

The name 'Bhutto' turned into a mirror image for a large number of young people in which they saw both the indignity they themselves experienced and the possibility of revolting against it. Careers, families, and friendships became secondary to the quest for healing the wound opened by Bhutto's death, as activists charted a path that took them to prisons, exile, and at times, death. It was indeed a difficult task for me to read the 'underground' literature produced by PPP activists during the Zia era from the vantage point of a politically timid present. Facing a military dictatorship externally backed by the mighty American Empire and internally supported by extremist forces, the chances of overrunning the Zia regime were always slim.

There was, however, something breathtakingly innocent about the resolve to continue fighting, even symbolically, in order to deny the regime the satisfaction that its power was complete. These activists displayed a firm indifference to the consequences of their actions, as if giving up on their commitments was not even an option. This affirmation of one's dignity in the face of an authoritarian order is an essential element of Pakistan's political history that is yet to be written. The term 'Bhuttoism' is intertwined with this longer history of finding dignity in a dehumanising world. The language of 'interests' is simply inadequate for writing this history, since no self-interested individual would suffer for a party that came to power from 1977 to 2007 for a grand total of four years. This was a pure labour of love, one that can put any contemporary rhetoric of 'revolution' to shame.

The failures of the PPP governments in 1988 and 1993 damaged the trust in the party's ideological commitments and its ability to govern. Yet, it could not take away from the party's symbolic status as simultaneously representing a crisis, and a promise. The crisis is the refusal of the elites to acknowledge the sovereignty of the people, a situation that has plagued Pakistan since its inception. On the other hand, it is also a promise that when the will of the people coalesces around a leader, an organisation and an idea, it has the capacity to make the mighty tremble. It is the unfinished task of asserting popular sovereignty in Pakistan that kept the PPP's appeal alive till late, despite the obvious shortcomings of the party leadership.

The history of defiance associated with the PPP is the reason why the trajectory of the party over the last decade has troubled many of its sympathisers. The packaging of 'conciliation' by the current party leadership as its 'novel' idea in Pakistani politics is embarrassingly naive. In fact, Pakistan has an excess of politicians, generals, journalists etc, who are willing to reconcile with any political actor if their interests are safeguarded, a tradition inherited from the colonial era. What was unique about the PPP was its ability to disrupt this consensus and identify the antagonisms obfuscated by the cynical use of 'patriotism' by state officials.

It is not surprising that the PPP has not been at the forefront of any movement on the burning issues of the day. The indifference of the party to the plight of peasants in Okara, slum dwellers in Islamabad, missing persons in Sindh and Balochistan, and the shocking silence around Mashal Khan's murder confirm the party's lack of interest in grassroots mobilisation. Instead, the focus seems to be on wooing political influentials, or holding innumerable 'cake-cutting ceremonies' to celebrate the various milestones in the personal lives of the Bhutto family. It is sad to witness such degeneration of a party that once contained the psychic investments of an entire generation.

There is a palpable sense of frustration among those activists whose political becoming occurred during the anti-Zia movement. The contradictory impulses of regret and pride shape their sense of self today. This contradiction is a direct result of a disrupted dream, shattered by those who were supposed to be its guardians. If the PPP of yesteryears was a conduit for the passions of a rebellious youth, today's compromised PPP represents nothing more than the absence of dreaming in contemporary Pakistani, an absence that paradoxically maintains a heavy presence in its ability to produce widespread disorientation in our social and political culture.

The PPP is in power in Sindh, and it may return to power in Islamabad someday. But it is fast losing the charm that turned it into a part of our region's folklore. And every generation needs its folklore and dreams to sustain its commitments. Inhabiting a world structured by a generalised suspicion that envelops even personal relations, we are a generation averse to commitments outside the ones imposed on us by the family, the state and the market system. In the wake of such tragic betrayals from the past, we must ask if there is still a point in holding onto ideals bigger than our individual selves. How we answer this question will have profound consequences for how we view history, politics, and ultimately, life itself.

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**P.S.**

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