

Pakistan: When the poet Habib Jalib made Lahore a city of rebellion against dictatorship

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An excerpt from 'Imagining Lahore', writer Haroon Khalid's romance with the legendary city, once in undivided India, now in Pakistan.

While Lahore is undoubtedly a symbol of hegemonic authority, it is also the city of Habib Jalib, the rebel poet, who challenged this hegemony his entire life. He was one of the loudest voices against the first military dictator of the country, Ayub Khan. At a time when all intellectuals, poets, writers and artists were silenced by the military regime, Jalib defied convention. Instead of focusing on romanticism and beauty, he talked about the streets of the country under military rule. Defying all guidelines, on a live mushaira being aired by Radio Pakistan, a state-run enterprise, Jalib went on to recite:

The stench of teargas lingers
The hail of bullets persists...

His rendezvous with incarceration began after this episode and continued till the end of his life.

"Mein ne us se yeh kaha" (I said this to him), a satirical poem, is one of his most memorable verses from that era.

The poem reminds the dictator how only he can salvage Pakistan, how only he can take it from night to day. It reminds him how a hundred million people of Pakistan are the "epitome of ignorance", "completely mindless", and how the dictator is the "Light of God" and "Wisdom and Knowledge personified". Jalib does acknowledge in the poem that there are a handful of people who oppose his rule and he, Ayub Khan, should "tear out their tongues" and "throttle their throats".

Jalib was a member of the Progressive Writers' Movement, a left-leaning literary organisation that aimed to use writing to inspire people to create a just and equal society for all.

After Partition, Lahore became the centre of this organisation in Pakistan, earning the city yet another title, that of the cultural capital of the country. It is through the Progressive Writers' Movement that writers like Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Saadat Hassan Manto, Ahmad Faraz and Hameed Akhtar challenged a state that was cosying up to the United States of America and increasingly defining itself in religious terms.

Even in the poem quoted above, Jalib mentions China and its "system". He mentions the friendly relationship between China and Pakistan and yet the paranoia against leftist politics in his country. "Stay clear of that [system]", he suggests, these masses "could never become rulers". At the end he expresses the desire, "You [Ayub] remain our President forever."

Even today, as Pakistan flirts yet again with democracy, the nostalgia for one-man authoritarian rule continues to surface sporadically. The narrative of a messiah who would save the country continues

to dominate political discussions. Imran Khan's entire political career is based on these romantic notions of a true Pakistani hero, who would finish off corruption and restore Pakistan to the glorious stature it is meant to achieve. Even Shehbaz Sharif's success in Punjab can be attributed to a "messiah" image he has successfully crafted for himself over the years – one man, with an iron determination to get things done.

In the past, however, such romanticisation has been associated with the men in khaki, who have ruled the country three times directly and continue to exert immense pressure on the civilian government indirectly. Despite their failed attempts at governing and providing stability, parts of the populace continue to be enamoured of them.

Particularly in the past few years, the cult of Raheel Shareef, the former army chief, exemplifies what Jalib was talking about in the 1960s. As the ratings of politicians fell, Shareef's popularity continued to soar. All good things in the country became associated with him, while all the failures were blamed on the politicians. On various occasions, posters exhorting him to overthrow a "corrupt" democratic system to establish a dictatorship were raised in various cities of the country.

Ayub's dictatorship marked a fundamental shift in Pakistan's foreign policy, the effects of which can be experienced till today. Breaking away from non-alignment, the state under him openly sided with the US in the Cold War that was being fought in every continent of the world through the respective proxies of the US and USSR. In compensation for US military aid, Pakistan's airbases were leased out to the CIA to spy on the Russians. The balance of domestic politics in the country also shifted forever, in favour of the military establishment. American support for military dictators, beginning with Ayub, then Zia and finally Musharraf, has been fundamental in not only the dictators' international legitimisation but also in suppressing domestic democratic resistance to them.

For all his atrocities, Ayub Khan today is remembered fondly in Pakistan.

His image plastered to the rear of trucks is a ubiquitous sight. While dictators after him were worshipped during their time in power and vilified after they exited the scene, Ayub continues to be held in esteem. School textbooks recall his time as the "Golden Period" of Pakistan, a narrative that continues to dominate popular political discourse. "Ideologically" aligned with the Americans, Pakistan under Ayub saw a rapid introduction of liberal economic reforms. While poverty remained rampant, the elite benefited from these policies and hence the narrative of "economic growth" became dominant. Many today acknowledge that wealth at that time remained confined to twenty-two of the richest families in the country. Talking about this uneven distribution of income, Jalib observed:

Twenty households prosper
As a million people suffer
President Ayub live forever

In 1962 when Ayub Khan introduced his Constitution, Jalib was one of the few to criticise it openly. One of his best remembered poems, "Dastoor", rejected the dictator's Constitution.

This constitution
This dawn without light
I refuse to acknowledge
I refuse to accept

Even today Jalib's 'Dastoor' is recited both by rebels and members of the political establishment. One of the most memorable moments in recent years was Shehbaz Sharif reciting it at one of his

political rallies.

Jalib, during his long career, particularly aligned himself with women on political issues. His first foray into feminist politics was in 1965, when he wrote a poem in honour of an actress, Neelo, who refused to be pressurised to perform for a state guest, the Shah of Iran. During the Pakistani presidential elections of 1965, when Ayub Khan was pitted against Fatima Jinnah in a battle rigged before it even began, Jalib supported the latter, calling her the mother of the nation.

In 1971, as Pakistan headed towards the darkest chapter since its creation, Jalib's was one of the only voices from West Pakistan, dominated as it was by Punjabi hegemony, to speak out against atrocities committed by the army in East Pakistan under the guise of Operation Searchlight. Flooded with state propaganda interspersed with legends of the gallant and chivalrous Pakistani soldier, West Pakistan supported the operation that was meant to silence Bengali nationalist sentiment.

With the arrival of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and his slogan of Islamist socialism, there was hope in the country's leftist circles. Jalib maintained an ambivalent relationship with the new prime minister. There were moments of warmth, but also of persecution. He was put behind bars for his opposition to the dismissal of the provincial government of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), now called Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and high-handedness in dealing with the separatist movement in Baluchistan by Bhutto.

Despite a bittersweet relationship with Bhutto, on the occasion of his death at the hands of Zia, Jalib wrote:

His magic has not been broken
His blood has become a slogan

The years to follow were to shape the nature of Pakistani society for generations to come. Today, as religious extremism raises its head not just in Lahore but every other city of the country, its roots can be traced to the hateful years of Zia, who actively mixed religion with politics, leading to an unprecedented Islamisation of state institutions. Infused with righteous piety, Zia was on a self-appointed crusade to "rectify" the country's moral issues. His Islamisation of the state and its institutions was meant to further "purify" the land of the pure.

Petty criminals, but mostly political opponents belonging to Bhutto's PPP, were flogged in public. Under the pretence of a religious system, Pakistan was ushered into one of its darkest periods. For Zia and his cronies, Pakistan was finally on the right path, heading towards enlightenment. Zia, the messiah, through Islamisation of state institutions, thought he had rectified all of Pakistan's problems. It is in this context that Jalib made a few objections in his poem, "Zulmat ko Zia". He said he could not call this cruelty kindness, this dark night dawn, this desert a rose garden, nor a human being God.¹¹

In another poem that mocked Zia's referendum of 1984, an attempt by the dictator to legitimise his position, Jalib wrote the following:

The city was desolated
Was it a jinn or was it a referendum?

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