

Emerging Trends

Ameneh Azam Ali writes from Gilgit, Pakistan

BENAZIR BHUTTO'S government came under attack from its first day in power. The opposition, led by Zia ul Haq's political heir, the Punjab chief minister Nawaz Sharif, lost no time in casting around for weapons to undermine the fragile Pakistan People's Party (PPP) majority in the National Assembly. But Zia's favourite weapon— Islamic conservatism—has been cast aside, having failed miserably to act as a rallying cry during the elections.

Political observers seem to agree on one thing about the new government—

neither Zia's economic nor his foreign policies are threatened with substantive change, given the stranglehold exercised by Pakistan's "special relationship" with the US. At most, the new PPP government can bring about changes in style, and tinker at the margins of social policy. Even the liberation of the government owned electronic media and the government controlled newspapers of the National Press Trust may well prove to be shortlived, given the likelihood of criticism and unrest in the coming months.

But two significant changes have

already emerged as a consequence of the PPP victory, and their importance is likely to grow. Perhaps it is wrong to characterise them as changes. More accurately, the elections crystallised and gave political expression to two major trends which have emerged during the repressive years of the Zia period - the devolution of power away from Islamabad and to the provinces and Karachi, expressed particularly by the Mohajir Qaumi Mahaz (MQM) victory; and the emergence of women, from the straitjacket of Islamisation, as a major political force.

Women casting their votes



If nothing else, Benazir's victory unleashed the pent up emotions of an entire generation. It was a victory for liberalism, for secularism, for the forces of progress and change, against the forces of medieval obscurantism. For weeks after the elections, Karachi's streets were filled with music, dancing and colour. Young girls walked alone and unharassed. Families emerged from the cocoons of their homes and joined the throngs celebrating the end of a nightmare. It may not have been a political or an economic revolution, but in Karachi and other cities it was certainly a cultural and social revolution.

The euphoria that gripped much of Pakistan during and after the elections should not, however, blind us to the still present dangers. Though there is a new mood of hope, it is a fragile victory, born of an inchoate desire for change. Many people did not vote at all—some because of the identity card restriction, but many because they were either not motivated or not mobilised through organised political activity. Many others voted against the PPP and Benazir, and voted for a continuation of Zia's policies. Though the "Islamisation process" has receded from public view, its votaries—the *mullas*, sections of the army and petty bourgeoisie, among others—have not relinquished their

ambition to impose it with greater force. Most ominous of all, the PPP government is hostage to the armed forces, who have rehabilitated their devastated image through the holding of elections, and acquired a holier than thou complacency as a result.

But Benazir's victory has served to dispel the psychological effects of 11 years of sophisticated media manipulation and disinformation. The Zia government, despite its political weaknesses, had become a pastmaster at the art of atomisation. The nation underwent a process of division, until it was reduced to tiny ethnic, linguistic, sectarian, political and social groupings. And the division between men and women, though not created by Zia, was skilfully manipulated and exacerbated, until women felt themselves to be aliens living in a man's world.

We—and the rest of the world—were told that Pakistanis, both men and women, wanted women to be ignorant and imprisoned. The *parda* system and all its attendant restrictions, both physical and psychological, were glorified and made into the basis of the Zia approach to social existence. Any woman who actively tried to resist it—and there were many—was labelled *maghrib posand* (Westernised)

and therefore unfit to speak for the majority of women. Feminists were ridiculed and isolated, and a new breed of modern Islamised women—heads eternally covered with *dupattas*, submissive smiles pinned to their downcast faces—was created to act as a model for those who ventured out of their homes.

Though these images have not been demolished overnight, they have been exposed as hollow and meaningless. The mere fact that a woman has become the prime minister, and has been chosen by the people as their leader, destroys the notion that a woman's worth is half that of a man. It also destroys the myth that Pakistan's men will not be ruled by a woman. Though nothing more concrete may take place, Pakistani women already feel more confident, less afraid, and proud to be women.

Not only has a woman come to power, but women have also participated in the elections in unprecedented numbers. The number of women candidates for nonreserved seats was higher than ever before (13), and so was the number of women voters. In some constituencies, more women than men cast votes. The government's decision to impose the identity card restriction was clearly in response to its perception that large

Begum Nusrat Bhutto addressing a public meeting in 1977



numbers of women, many of whom do not possess identity cards, were likely to vote for the PPP. And it was not only the PPP which captured women's votes. The MQM victory, both in these elections and in the local government polls a year ago, owes much to the participation of women, both as voters, and as political workers and fundraisers.

Benazir acknowledged the debt she owed women, and their importance as a political force, in her first address to the nation. She promised to repeal "antiwomen legislation" and emphasised education and health care for women. The fact that she acknowledged women in this way does not spring, however, from any longstanding commitment on her part to their interests. Feminists who welcomed her return from exile in 1986, received a cool reception when they approached her to place women's concerns on the PPP agenda. It was only recently that the party adopted the charter of demands presented by the Women's Action Forum to all political parties.

Perhaps Benazir's apparent indifference to women was prompted by caution and pragmatism, by a desire to underplay the fact of her being a woman, and a fear of being labelled a *maghrib pasand* feminist. The caution may be understandable, the indifference less so. Playing the *mullas'* game, heavily swathed in *chadars*, Benazir attempted to deflect the fundamentalists' ire.

But nobody was fooled; those who rejected Islamisation voted for her; those who supported it tried to make an issue of the fact that she is a woman. Leaflets showing her clad in a bikini were showered from planes, allegations of immorality and loose living were made in the rightwing press, and a photo of Begum Nusrat Bhutto wearing a sleeveless blouse and dancing with Gerald Ford was used on the cover of a fundamentalist magazine, to project images of Westernised decadence. Ultimately, the campaign backfired, and Benazir's supporters rallied around her even more fervently, appalled at the ferocious display of antiwomen propaganda.



Women police arresting a woman of an antigovernment demonstration in Karachi during the Zia regime

But, despite the clear rejection of *mullaism* by the electorate and despite the changed environment, the struggle for improvements in women's condition remains an uphill one. There will be little room for welfare or social sector development as long as the commitment to a large defence budget and IMF and World Bank conditionalities continues. The kind of concrete changes needed to support women —education for girls, health care systems, cheap and efficient public transport, improved working conditions—will not take place.

The elections have given political

expression to the fact that Pakistan's people are not willing to be shrouded in medieval restrictions. The nation has voted for the twentieth century and against *mullas*, military and feudalism. But, in a sense, we are only catching up with ourselves, only acknowledging the subterranean changes which have continued to take place during the worst years of army rule, despite the repression and psychological warfare waged by the Zia government. The next step—to shake off the bondage of imperialism and build a new leadership and an independent polity—remains to be taken. □