

# Pakistan's 'Benazir' (Unique) Revolution

by Balraj Puri



Benazir & PPP supporters during the election campaign

IF revolutions are not to be measured by the number of heads that roll or the extent of bloodshed, the governmental changeover in Pakistan must rank as a unique revolutionary event of the year, next in importance only to the *perestroika* revolution in the Soviet Union.

Pakistan's revolution is *benazir* (unique) in many respects. Benazir Bhutto's rise to power is more significant than even that of Razia Sultana, the first Muslim woman ruler in the world. For while the latter inherited the throne, the former passed through hellfire to get it.

It explodes the myth that people of Asia, particularly Muslims, are too backward to elect a woman as their ruler. Most elected women leaders in the world till date have belonged to the East, not the West. Pakistan now joins India, Israel, Sri Lanka and Philippines, all of which have already had elected women heads of government. Popular upsurge in Bangladesh is also led by women who are leading two political fronts and are challenging the military rulers. A similar pattern is visible in Burma too.

Elections in Pakistan exploded another myth about the role of *mullas* in Muslim politics which most non Muslims almost take for granted. While some hold the Muslim community in contempt for this, others, who claim to be more secular and liberal, adopt a patronising attitude towards it.

In reality, 800 years of what is called Muslim rule and about one century of modern politics culminating in the partition of the country, bear eloquent testimony to the marginal role of *mullas* in Muslim politics. Islam in the subcontinent has certain unique characteristics. Here, Islam encountered ancient Indian civilisation and, later, British imperialism. Secular political leadership has always dominated Muslim politics here. It is not accidental that a Razia Sultana could happen only here.

Muslim kings in the subcontinent nominated *mullas* who did not play a decisive role in politics. They could not dictate to kings. The *sufis* played a more important role than did the *mullas*. The *sufis* and the kings represented the real face of Islam in the subcontinent, not the

*mullas*. Even today, the most important symbols of Islam in India are Chisthi of Ajmer and the Taj Mahal and Red Fort. These visible symbols represent nonpriestly traditions.

Over the last century too, theocratic leaders did not dominate Muslim politics. Gandhi rallied the *ulema* around himself but they could not attract the Muslim masses. The masses, led by Sir Syed, Dr Iqbal and Jinnah, with Aligarh as their storm centre, were alienated from Gandhi and the *ulema*. This trend led to Muslim separatism. Iqbal was the chief progenitor of the Pakistani idea. Pakistan is perhaps the only country in the world to have a poet as its patron saint. Most other countries have a warrior, king or politician as founder. This unique feature is part of the subcontinental cultural tradition.

The outcome of the recent elections marks a decisive return of Pakistan to the tradition of subcontinental Islam. The *mulla* led Jamat-e-Islami was totally routed, and won no more than three seats in the

and feel threatened as Muslims, they assert Muslim identity and solidarity, which caused partition. In normal circumstances, they behave like any other group, where language, culture and ethnic factors matter as much as religious factors.

Pakistani behaviour under military rule was not normal. It was an aberration caused by their perception of a threat from the Indian government, by the Afghan situation, and by the Iranian, Arab and US support to the religious leadership. The leadership's mix of religion and militarism controlled popular democratic urges for some time. But normal democratic, ethnic and cultural urges reasserted themselves in these elections, with the easing of the situation.

Subcontinental Muslims are not alien to the concept of democracy nor to that of federalism. The recent elections in Pakistan have seen not just the assertion of regional ethnic identities but also their recognition. Sindhi identity was articulated in the personality of Benazir. Earlier, Sindhi

ruler, Sindhis no longer need to seek an autonomous Sindh.

This election also saw the first recognition of the distinct identity of the Urdu speaking Muslims. Earlier, this section, the *mohajirs*, used to support other parties. This time, they asserted their own identity and ventilated their protest in an unambiguous manner through the Mohajir Qaumi Mahaz (MQM) which won 13 out of 15 seats in Karachi.

In Punjab, the PPP could not sweep the elections as they did in Sindh, because Punjabis who have so far dominated national politics, were apprehensive of a shift of power to Sindhi leadership. The support garnered by the Islamic Democratic Alliance (IDA) in Punjab is a measure not of fundamentalism in Punjab but of the urge towards Punjabi identity. Had another Punjabi led alternative been available, Punjabis would have voted for it. This is confirmed by the fact that the IDA got more votes in state assembly elections than in the national assembly elections. In the latter, the Punjabis were voting for a national alternative, but in state elections, they did not want a Sindhi led party to dominate their state.

In Baluchistan and Frontier Province the hold of Wali Khan's party was damaged because of his pro India stance on the Afghan issue which was perceived as a pro Soviet stance. So Pathan identity could not express itself as clearly. In Baluchistan, the PPP did not fare as well, partly because of the memory of Bhutto's crushing of the Baluch revolt.

Although the PPP did not need the support of the MQM because they already had a majority, yet they agreed to a coalition just to give recognition to the identity of the Urdu speaking minority, for the first time in Pakistan. So far, everyone in Pakistan had been asking the *mohajirs* to merge their identity in the mainstream. Thus, a shift in stand is visible in the PPP choosing to recognise the *mohajirs*' identity and to share power with them, although under no compulsion to do so.

This is not to suggest that Pakistan has achieved perfect federalism. It has not, but there are clear indications of a federalism. There are still many imponderables in the future of Pakistan, in its democracy and development of a



**Taking the oath of office**

National Assembly. This also signifies the return of Pakistan to the political culture of the subcontinent, away from the West Asian culture, to which its military rulers and US strategists were trying to drive it.

This indicates that when subcontinental Muslims are under siege

identity was seeking other avenues. A movement led by G.M. Syed was demanding a separate sovereign state of Sindh. That sentiment has not been crushed but has been diverted through the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). Since a Sindhi leader has been accepted as the

# Traditions Of Dissent



Iqbal Bano

federal system. This is true of India too. While Pakistanis are starting on their new path with enthusiasm, Indians, who started their journey long ago, are showing signs of weariness.

While Pakistan has recognised ethnic identities, the prime minister of India repeatedly proclaims that linguistic reorganisation of the Indian states was the biggest blunder committed in independent India. The home minister too declared on the floor of parliament that those who talk of subnational identities are antinational. The Congress (I) reaction to the Sarkaria Commission report was that the centre should be strengthened. Thus, the ruling party betrays a trend towards homogenisation which holds out a grave threat to federalism.

The recent developments in Pakistan are of profound significance for the people of India. They offer an opportunity for reviving what may be called a civilisational federation of the subcontinent. Transnational identities have acquired a new role and significance. But these are a two edged weapon. Kashmiri, Punjabi, Sindhi and Urdu speaking communities can become instruments for the building of

Although censorship, particularly of government controlled media, and crushing of dissent were blatant under military rule in Pakistan, yet the picture was not as bleak as most of us in India are led to believe. The intellectuals of India and Pakistan share common traditions and urges, and it is not as if the picture was one of black and white.

Despite press censorship, courageous magazines like *Herald* continued to come out with remarkably outspoken reporting and commentary. Popular forms of protest included a widely circulated repertory of Zia jokes, poetry readings, *mushairas*, plays, creative writing. It is significant that despite a much longer experience of democracy, the Indian intelligentsia did not respond with any comparable creative protest to the Emergency but, with a few honourable exceptions, succumbed without a murmur.

When political meetings were banned in Pakistan, *mushairas* functioned as an important forum for the expression of disaffection. These were large public gatherings where the audience was in no doubt as to the political implications of the poems recited. One famous example is Iqbal Bano's rendering of Faiz's poem "Vayabka Vajah-e-Rabka", which uses Islamic millennial imagery to look forward to a new nonauthoritarian order. Even on an audio tape, the participation of the huge audience overwhelms the listener. Audience response is not in the nature of the usual applause for the singer, but political support for the message. Her singing was carried along on waves of jubilant sound from the audience, particularly at the refrain "We too shall see it" — clearly interpreted to mean the downfall of the military regime. We reproduce a rough translation from the original Urdu:

We shall see it  
Surely we too shall see it—  
That day which has been promised us  
That day preordained,  
When the huge mountains of oppression and injustice  
Will fly away like so much cotton;  
When, under the feet of us, the oppressed,  
This earth will throb and rumble;  
When, above the heads of those who hold power,  
The lightning will flash again and again;  
When all idols will be removed  
From the *kaba* of god's earth;  
When we, the true of heart,  
Who are condemned by fanatics,  
Will be seated on high places,  
And all crowns will be flung off,  
All thrones will fall.  
Only the name of god will remain  
Who is absent as well as present,  
Who is the seen as well as the seer.  
The cry of "Anal Haq"\*\* will rise up—  
Which I too am, and you too are,  
And the creation of god will rule  
Which I too am, and you too are.

\*\*"I am Truth" — the famous declaration of the Sufi Mansur-el-Hallaj, for which he was tortured to death by the Caliph-el-Muqtadir in the year 922.

bridges of understanding and harmony between India and Pakistan. But they can also be used to undermine their respective national loyalties.

Neither the euphoria amongst the bulk

of Hindus in India, nor the sense of bewilderment amongst sections of Muslims in India, in response to Pakistan's *benazir* revolution, has so far promised to develop into a mature and healthy reaction.