

Zia's Legacy—Balanced Consistency The Calm in the Storm

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Mohammad Zia ul-Haq never basked in the popularity enjoyed by the man he forced from power. He is remembered in the outside world as the hangman of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and even in Pakistan the controversy surrounding his name prevents rational appraisal of his tenure as President of Pakistan. His violent death in August 1988 only deepened the Zia enigma. A balanced picture of Zia's rule may never be possible, but the record shows the soldier-president served Pakistan at a time of renewed crisis. A less disciplined, more politically-inspired leader might have reacted differently to events, but it is doubtful he or she would have been more effective in the office. Nor had Zia been groomed for the role he was to play in the last eleven years of his life. Neither training nor ambition marked him for political ascendancy. Lust for power and privilege seemed to escape him. From the beginning to the end of his reign Zia was guided by the military code that dominated and directed his life. He led Pakistan in accordance with strict doctrine, and both his domestic and foreign policies conformed to a pre-set agenda that emphasized the preservation and survival of the nation. Zia was not a risk-taker. He was not given to gambling with the country's future, and nowhere is this more evident than in his management of Pakistan's foreign policy.

1. Continuity in Pakistan's Foreign Policy

Zia took the reins from Zulfikar Ali Bhutto while the latter was in full stride. Without a foreign policy programme of his own, Zia picked up Bhutto's cadence and generally held to the course of his discredited predecessor. In his first few months in office Zia visited Saudi Arabia, Iran, the UAE, Afghanistan, Kuwait, Turkey, Libya, Jordan, and China. The purpose of the visits was familiarization and the maintenance of contacts at the highest level with Islamic and other friendly or neighbouring states. With the exception of Afghanistan, these were the countries that Pakistan had especially

cultivated, and on whom it had come to depend for moral as well as material support. Moreover, many of the Islamic states on Zia's itinerary were home to hundreds of thousands of Pakistanis who worked there and the government was ever mindful of the need to ensure their continued domicile. Bhutto's sudden removal had not been anticipated, hence Zia was constrained to explain the reasons for the coup and to emphasize the Martial Law administration's intention to hold to commitments made during the tenure of the previous regime.

To herald the end of 1977, Zia hosted the visit to Pakistan of his Bangladeshi counterpart, President General Ziaur Rahman. The two generals shared common experiences, and the fact that Zia was serving in Jordan and had not participated in the 1971 civil war, made it easier for the two men to embrace one another. Ziaur Rahman told Zia that the days of Bangladesh-Pakistan hostility were behind them and that the interests of their two countries called for greater co-operation. The Bangladesh President expressed the need to free his country from its Indian dependence, and he used the occasion to brief Zia about his plan for a South Asian cultural and economic association. As former brothers-in-arms the two men were said to have talked openly about their mutual concerns and interests.¹ Ziaur Rahman's reported to have registered satisfaction that Bhutto had been removed. As a principal in the events leading up to the civil war, Bhutto was a grey eminence to most Bangladeshis. And although Zia had no doubt indicated a desire to protract his rule, Ziaur Rahman's bulwark left little doubt he was more comfortable with his army counterpart in Islamabad. Pressing issues prevented their forming a continuing intimate relationship in the years that followed, but the establishment of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SARCC) in 1981 was a notable product of their deliberations. Ziaur Rahman's death at the hands of assassins in that same year prevented the continuation of their relationship.

The British Prime Minister also made a brief visit to Pakistan in January 1978, but the arrival of President Mohammad Daud in March had far more significance. The Afghan leader had been Pakistan's most ardent Muslim nemesis. Daud was the architect of Afghan hostility towards Pakistan. He was the leading exponent of the 'Patriotist Movement' which had plagued Pakistani government since independence. And he was a persistent critic of

Islamabad's ties to the United States, and especially to Washington's alliance systems. Daud had marched to the tune of a different drummer. He had sided with India in its disputes with Pakistan, had provided some of Pakistan's more disgruntled opposition leaders with asylum and assistance, was alleged to have supported and armed Pakistani dissidents and terrorists, and seemed to have placed his lot in the hands of Moscow. Moreover, the Kremlin had championed his policies and nurtured his military establishment for almost three decades.¹

After Daud's *coup d'etat* against his cousin, Zahir Shah, in 1973, the act which terminated the Afghan monarchy, Daud began to transform Afghanistan into a republic. Bhutto saw the possibility of a new relationship with Kabul and he signalled Daud of his desire to commence new talks for the purpose of reconciling their differences. A breakthrough apparently was made in 1976 during a meeting between the two principals. Although these conversations were interrupted by the *coup* that forced Bhutto from power in July 1977, Zia picked up the thread and flew to Kabul that October. During their meeting the two men agreed that the dialogue initiated by Bhutto should continue. Daud's visit to Pakistan in March 1978, therefore, was the culmination of several years of persistent endeavour. It was also facilitated by the Shah of Iran who used his good offices with both parties to engender an atmosphere of collegiality for their deliberations. The Shah had caught Daud's attention with an offer of money that was to help Afghanistan wean itself from its dependence on Moscow. Coupled with Pakistan's demonstration of concern and willingness to help the Kabul government manage Afghanistan's unique problem, the Shah's intervention apparently caused Daud to reappraise his long-standing hostility towards Pakistan.

Daud's welcome in Islamabad was unprecedented. Crowds of spectators were mobilized for the official reception and the generally emotional Afghan President was literally overwhelmed by the magnitude and character of the greeting. Symbolically at least, the Pakistani nation indicated its desire to resolve their outstanding differences. Daud appeared receptive to the idea of peace with his eastern neighbour and in a speech at the Shalimar Gardens in Lahore he voiced the thought that 'we are waiting for the day when God Almighty will give us the wisdom and foresight to find a just and

¹ *Frontline*, 23 December 1977, 'Foreign Affairs Pakistan', 4, 12, Islamabad.

² See Lawrence Ziring, *Iran, Turkey, and Afghanistan: A Political Chronology*, New York: Praeger, 1981.

...our political problems and become allies. In a public reply, General Zia reaffirmed Pakistan's determination to find a mutually acceptable solution. Zia ceremonially toasted the health and happiness of the Afghan leader and wished him a long life and the pursuit of progress and prosperity for his country. As he uttered those words, he could not have known that in a little more than a month Daud would himself be the target of an army coup, and would Pakistan enter into a volley of international agreements during the first year of the new administration and there was no indication of a change in direction or objective in the country's foreign policy. Efforts were made to improve relations with Afghanistan, energies were also turned in the direction of India. A telecommunication agreement was signed with New Delhi in October 1977, and the Jatal Hydroelectric Plant on the Chenab river was approved in April 1978. Agreements were also entered into with the socialist governments of Romania, Hungary, Mozambique, and Yugoslavia, and General Zia personally hosted the visit of the North Korean Vice-President Pak Sung Chul, and Libya's Vice President, Abdus Salam Ahmad Jalloud. One highlight of Zia's first year in office was the inaugural ceremony of the Karakorum Highway at Thakot on 18 June 1978. Built largely with Chinese labour and resources, the highway brought Pakistan and China into even closer embrace and solidified their common association.

By contrast, relations with the United States remained in a state of relative tension. American aid to Pakistan had been largely suspended in April 1977, before Bhutto's fall. The running controversy between the two governments centred on the country's nuclear programme, and, more specifically, on the reprocessing plant being constructed in Pakistan by France. Islamabad had insisted that the plant met all the guidelines for international safeguards and that neither Paris nor the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency had shown concern that the plant might be used for the manufacture of weapons-grade plutonium. In an interview with a correspondent of the *Washington Post* on 11 March 1978, General Zia argued that Pakistan had the sovereign right to acquire nuclear processing technology as a means to boosting its energy production. Zia complained that the Carter administration had unfairly accused Pakistan of promoting nuclear proliferation. Scoffing at the attack

Government of Pakistan, 1973, p. 2
 his honour at the Shalimar Gardens, Lahore', *Foreign Affairs Pakistan*, 5, 3, Islamabad
 'Speech by President Mohammad Daud of Afghanistan at the civic reception given
 1978, *Foreign Affairs Pakistan*, 5, 9-10, Islamabad: Government of Pakistan, 1978, pp. 1-2

he cited countries like Brazil and Israel, who he said, possessed more advanced nuclear programmes. Unlike Pakistan, they were neither pressed nor criticized.

Generally speaking, Zia did not receive a good press in the United States. The manner in which he had achieved power, his defiant attitude, his orthodox Islamic practices, were not stated to win him many friends in or outside the American government. United States newspapers focused their attention on Zia's austere values, and particularly, his insistence on the use of Islamic prescription for alleged crimes against society. During this formative period American journals were full of articles describing crime and punishment in Pakistan, and especially the matter of public floggings that were said to be carried out in strict accordance with Islamic law. Photographs of these public punishments appeared in US and western European newspapers, and American thinking about Pakistan was fixed on what was judged medieval behaviour unbefitting a contemporary society. Moreover, the Carter administration's tilt towards New Delhi and the comparatively more balanced press coverage given to Indian affairs added to the strain in American-Pakistan relations.

For its part Pakistan continued to pursue reconciliation with India. Zia attended the funeral in Nairobi of Kenyan President Jomo Kenyatta in September 1978 and, while there, met Prime Minister Morarji Desai whose *Janata* Party had defeated Indira Gandhi's Congress Party in the 1977 parliamentary elections. Desai brought fresh ideas to India's foreign policy and high priority was given to strengthening communication and understanding with Islamabad. Zia talked of their meeting as the beginning of a new dialogue and said the exchange was 'exploratory, good, friendly and profitable'. Looking ahead to continuing discussions, the two leaders entertained reciprocal visits. Zia did not hesitate to reveal that he believed Desai was a man Pakistan could do business with.

On his return from Nairobi, Zia paid a call on the Shah in Tehran and then visited Noor Mohammad Taraki, the new leader of Afghanistan, and the ceremonial head of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (*Khalq*). The *Khalq*, a Marxist organization, engineered the April coup against Daud and was seeking to consolidate its revolution. Supported by the Soviet Union, the Afghan Marxists

Interview by General Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq to the correspondent of the *Washington Post*, *Foreign Affairs Pakistan*, 5, 3, Islamabad: Government of Pakistan, March 1978, pp. 16-17
 Meeting between the CMLA and the Indian Prime Minister in Nairobi, 2 September, 1978, *Foreign Affairs Pakistan*, 5, 9-10, Islamabad: Government of Pakistan, 1978, pp. 1-2

asked how questions about Pakistan's security and Zia walked a fine line during his brief stay in Kabul. The left Afghanistan with the public view that he was 'optimistic' about the future of Pakistani-Afghan relations; privately, however, he could not conceal his foreboding.

II. Zia at the Crossroads

The Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt were signed in 1978. The next stage in their deliberations produced a peace treaty. But instead of praise, Anwar el-Sadat was made a target of scorn in the Arab world. A majority of Arab states severed diplomatic ties with Egypt and the country was suspended from membership in the Arab League. Although Pakistan shared the sentiments of the uncontrolled Arab states, it did not emulate their actions. Nor did Islamabad support the isolation of Egypt. The new circumstances created by the treaty necessitated a change in tactics, but Zia carefully treaded a course between the parties.

Change was also in the offing in Iran where street demonstrations against the Shah had mounted in intensity in 1978. Tens of thousands of Iranians flooded Tehran's centre demanding the abdication of the Shah and the expulsion of his American advisors.¹ The authorities were powerless to control them. In the deteriorating circumstances, Pakistan's long and sustained support of the Shah proved an embarrassment to the Zia administration, and Islamabad was forced to weaken the continuing, long term value of such a policy. As in Egypt, there Anwar el-Sadat, another friend of Pakistan had been made the target of popular abuse, Zia was hardpressed to both sustain his affection for the Shah and, at the same time, communicate to the monarch's emotional critics that Islamabad understood and sympathized with their complaint.

In India, the Morarji Desai government faced its severest test and eventually succumbed to weaknesses within the coalition, yielding over to another, even more fragmented *Janata* faction. Zia could not prevent the closing of Pakistan's new opening to India, nor could relations between the two countries be controlled.

The crises of 1978 became the tragedies of 1979. In Pakistan where a had promised national elections, attention was riveted on the fate of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto. Bhutto had been accused by a private citizen having ordered the murder of a political rival. He was subsequently sentenced to death. His appeal worked its way through the court system until it reached Zia's sk. Zia alone had the power to spare his life, but the Chief Martial

¹ Michael Hudson and William Lewis, *Debauch: The American Failure in Iran*, New York: Vintage, 1982, pp. 165-94.

Law Administrator, addressing the need for uniform standards of justice and citing Islamic law, decided not to rescind the death sentence. Governments from every part of the world, from the United States, the Soviet Union, China, and the Arab states, asked Zia to forego the death penalty. Saudi Arabia called upon Zia to exile Bhutto, and Riyadh even offered to house him and to guarantee that he would never return to Pakistan. Zia acknowledged all these pleas but in the end rejected them. Bhutto was hanged in Rawalpindi prison on 4 April 1979.¹ The execution of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto was a decisive act and Zia's future was forever sealed. Later in the year he would withdraw the election notice, announce the indefinite suspension of electoral activity, extend martial law, and abandon the notion of retiring from the political scene. Zia was no longer a stand-in for Pakistan's highest office, he was there by his own actions and his own choice. Some observers believe Zia decided to remain at the helm of the Pakistani government under pressure from his colleagues in the army high command. But Zia also had expressed the opinion that it was not time to reintroduce civilian government. With one eye on the domestic situation, Zia hoped to take advantage of the dramatic changes on the other side of Pakistan's borders.

III. The Necessity for Change

Faced with national rebellion, and with his troops unwilling to save his throne, the Shah fled Iran on 16 January 1979. On 1 February, Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile to head a revolutionary government. Iran broke its ties with the United States and launched a virulent campaign aimed at purging anything and anyone that reminded Iranians of the fallen monarch or his American associates. Iran was consumed in an orgy of blood and from Pakistan's near vantage point the situation was totally unpredictable.

Conditions in Afghanistan were little better. The Marxist *Khalq* organization had been encouraged by their Soviet mentors to accept a partnership with the *Parcham* faction of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan. In so doing they were also obliged to include the *Parcham* leader, Babrak Karmal, as a member of their revolutionary government. But Hafizullah Amin, Karmal's *Khalq* rival, had gained control of the government and he was determined to prevent Karmal from assuming influence over the movement. Insisting on the rapid transformation of the Afghan society, Amin implemented a host of unpopular reforms that even the Soviets found excessive.¹

¹ Victoria Schofield, *Bhutto: Trial and Execution*, London: Cassell, 1979, pp. 210-37.