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## **Women Activism in Pakistan: Reimagining the President Zia versus the “Bhutto ladies”<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

*The paper tries to understand women’s activism in Pakistan by reimagining the reaction and response of “Bhutto ladies”, namely, Nusrat Bhutto and Benazir Bhutto, to the steps taken by Zia-ul-Haq, President of Pakistan, after the execution of Z. A. Bhutto, to control democracy and block political activities in the country. The Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) has been one of the most popular parties of Pakistan but after the execution of Z.A. Bhutto it encountered enormous challenges particularly of its very survival as a political entity. Nusrat Bhutto, wife of ZA Bhutto, and Benazir Bhutto, the daughter of ZA Bhutto offered historic and monumental resistance to Zia’s dictatorial rule which brought out women to show their approval/disapproval of the government’s measures which was fantastic dynamics of Pakistan’s history. Profuse literature has been produced to discuss the women activism and Benazir Bhutto’s leadership but few have investigated the phenomenon with the frame the authors intend to apply for reimagining the role of “Bhutto ladies” in 1979. Therefore, this paper attempts to explore and analyze the challenges these two “Bhutto ladies” faced following the execution of its Chairman Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, to the postponement of the general elections promised by Zia- ul- Haq in October 1979. Moreover, it attempts to investigate the nature and direction of PPP’s politics during this period.*

**Keywords:** PPP, Mrs. Nusrat Bhutto, Ms. Benazir Bhutto, President Zia- ul- Haq, , Local Bodies, general elections

### **Introduction**

The period from the execution of Pakistan People’s Party’s PPP’s founding chairman Mr Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in April 1979 to the postponement of the general elections in October 1979 is politically a fascinating period in several respects. It witnessed a great void in the PPP’s headship as well as the challenge of reorganization of the party which went through acute political witch hunt. Side by side, these months presented the challenge of contesting the Local Bodies elections and the prospects of general elections in November 1979, if won, could bring the party back in power, which was snatched from it in July 1977, however, before it could achieve that it had to traverse the political minefield set by

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President Zia in the form of amendments to the Political Parties Act and the system of proportional representation. How one power player would try to outclass the other is the focus of this study.

#### Challenges faced by “Bhutto Ladies” and their Response

It is generally understood that a good leadership gets strengthened from the challenges it faces and likewise the “Bhutto ladies” faced profuse challenges after the execution of Z. A. Bhutto and emerged strong and resilient. There is no doubt that the execution of Z A Bhutto by the martial law regime of President General Mohammad Zia- ul- Haq on 4 April 1979 created a leadership crisis for the party’s leadership that was already under considerable strain by being at the receiving end of the wrath of the martial law regime since the overthrow of the PPP’s government in the coup of 5 July 1977, however, the void had to be swiftly filled if the party was to survive and move in a meaningful direction. There were several eligible candidates and the internal power struggle among them could have split the party and weakened it more than ever. Influential senior leaders such as former chief minister Sindh Mr. Ghulam Mustafa Jatoi, ex-governor Punjab Mr Ghulam Mustafa Khar, etc. labelled as the ‘Old Guard’, who had been with the party since its founding in 1967 could stake claim and so could the “Bhutto ladies” (wife Begum Nusrat Bhutto and daughter Ms Benazir Bhutto of Chairman Bhutto) whereas the two sons of Mr. Bhutto had been in exile since the overthrow of their father’s government. The Zia regime had a vested interest in seeing the party weakened. Nobody could predict as to how this intra party power struggle could have unfolded and what could have been its outcome? Fingers were crossed. The party leadership acted in a mature and sagacious manner as it decided to elect Begum Nusrat Bhutto as its chairperson. An announcement to this effect was communicated within a week of Mr. Bhutto’s execution through a press conference in Lahore by the Punjab Secretary General of the party Rao Hafeezullah Tariq.<sup>2</sup>

While the party closed ranks behind Begum Nusrat Bhutto, the opponents tried to create a controversy over her headship. A right-wing Urdu newspaper ‘*Jasarat*’ of Karachi as quoted in the daily ‘Dawn’ was at the forefront in this regard.<sup>3</sup> It raised several pointed questions to make her leadership controversial: Had there been an election or a referendum in the party to make her the chairperson? Had Mr. Bhutto left any will recommending his wife’s name to assume the party’s leadership after him? ‘*Jasarat*’ commented that it was generally thought that Mr. Bhutto was grooming his daughter Benazir as his political heir therefore Begum Nusrat Bhutto was not even the choice of her late husband and therefore her position was just like the widow of Chairman Mao Zedong in China. To edge out both the ‘Bhutto ladies’ from the claim of heading the party, ‘*Jasarat*’ alleged that Begum Bhutto was devoid of leadership qualities and daughter Benazir was so young that the senior leaders found it intolerable to serve under her. The field was open for the critics to indulge in all sorts of criticism because both the ‘Bhutto ladies’ being in detention could not respond in person.

Before the issue of legitimacy of Begum Bhutto’s chairpersonship could develop into a crisis, the PPP came into action. First, Mr. G M Jatoi gave a statement that expressed complete confidence in the leadership of Mrs. Bhutto<sup>4</sup> and in the last

week of May 1979, the PPP Central Executive Committee (CEC), the highest decision-making body of the party held its first meeting in Lahore after the execution of its chairman and unanimously elected Mrs. Bhutto as the chairperson of the party<sup>5</sup> and added if Begum Nusrat was prevented from taking part in politics by the government then Benazir Bhutto would lead the party.<sup>6</sup> Within a few days of CEC's decision, the Punjab Government released both the 'Bhutto ladies' after a seven month detention.<sup>7</sup> Despite release Begum Bhutto could not start a public life because she had to go through '*Iddat*' – the mandatory four month period that a Muslim widow spends in house after the demise of husband.<sup>8</sup>

To strengthen the legitimacy of the 'Bhutto ladies' as the unchallenged leaders of the party and to impress upon the supporters and members of the party, few developments were of vote. First, Benazir vowed never to leave the people and country as her father was buried here.<sup>9</sup> Two, to squash the rumors that talked about a tussle between the mother and daughter over the leadership of the party, Benazir endorsed all decisions of the CEC.<sup>10</sup> Third, the Punjab being the largest province, its provincial organization had a decisive say in the PPP. When the party's Punjab Provincial Committee declared its open support to the chairpersonship of Mrs Nusrat Bhutto, the issue of legitimacy of her leadership in the party was settled. Lastly, her legitimacy could be further cemented if some kind of a continuity could be established between Chairman Bhutto and Chairperson Mrs. Bhutto. '*Jasarat*' had tried to make her controversial by stating that she was not the choice of her husband as the party's leader after him as he was grooming Benazir. Begum Nusrat Bhutto killed such controversies in her first public appearance in Karachi after completing '*Iddat*' by stating that Mr. Bhutto had once confided to her, "You will lead the people to victory and I will hear the march of their progress from my resting place in Larkana" and vehemently denied any disunity or internal tussle in the party.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, tongues continued to wag especially those who looked upon Begum Nusrat Bhutto's assumption of chairpersonship as a kind of hereditary leadership in contravention of democratic principles in a popular democratic party. When the BBC's David Lomax asked Benazir Bhutto in her first interview to a foreign news organization after her release from long detention that whether she believed in hereditary leadership and whether people would accept her or her mother as the leader of PPP, Benazir shot back that she did not believe in hereditary leadership at all, however the people would accept them for their sacrifices.<sup>12</sup>

After managing the succession issue about the leadership of the party, another daunting task faced by the leadership was to rally the party into a viable potent political force as it was in complete disarray consequent to the overthrow of its government and the subsequent hanging of its founding chairman. According to a liberal estimate, during the two-year witch hunting between 1977-'79, about one hundred thousand party workers were imprisoned and around eleven thousand were awarded whipping sentences.<sup>13</sup> Hardly and political party in the country's history had ever been meted with such brutal treatment. The long witch hunting had demoralized both the leadership and the rank and file. The arduous challenge was to reorganize the party. To do that the party tried to bring some pressure on the Martial Law regime by demanding the release of its captives. It became a standard practice in meetings of its central and provincial organizations to pass

resolutions demanding the release of political detainees as well as journalists, trade union leaders and students.<sup>14</sup> The strategy was successful to a certain extent as the government did release a group of its leaders such the Deputy Secretary General (Retired General), Tikka Khan, President PPP Punjab Sheikh Rafiq Ahmed, etc. in May 1979<sup>15</sup> but it was more like the cat and mouse game between the regime and the party because if the former released some leaders, it imprisoned some more or disqualified some from politics altogether such as Ghulam Mustafa Khar, who was tried in absentia under Prevention of Corruption Act 1947, Martial Law Regulation (MLR) 21 and Sections 42, 463 and 471 of the Pakistan Penal Code by a military court in Bahawalpur and awarded fourteen years rigorous imprisonment forcing Khar to go in self-exile in London.<sup>16</sup>

The critical plight of the party was revealed by its Punjab President Sheikh Rafiq Ahmed who admitted that there was scarcity of funds and almost all of its top leaders were disallowed from taking part in active politics.<sup>17</sup> Despite the trying circumstances, the party did make efforts to reorganize itself. For example, the Acting Secretary General Farooq Ahmad Leghari while presiding the meeting of the CEC announced that the vacant positions in the party were being filled; directed the members of the CEC to establish contacts with party workers to communicate party's policies and directed party leaders and office bearers to set up party offices in their areas and form legal aid committees to assist those party workers who were facing judicial trials.<sup>18</sup> He promised that the process of reorganization would be completed by mid-August.<sup>19</sup> There is evidence that shows that at least these efforts bore fruit in three districts of Karachi-- East, South and West-- where office bearers for various posts were appointed with Allaudin Ahmad Abbasi as the president of the coordination committee and Maulana Ehtaramul Haq Thanvi as the secretary-cum-member of this committee.<sup>20</sup> To revitalize the organization in the Baluchistan province, Benazir Bhutto herself undertook a six-day tour.<sup>21</sup> She had also planned a tour of Punjab to rejuvenate the organization but it could not materialize due to unknown reasons.<sup>22</sup> The top leadership of the party did feel that it was betrayed by some leaders after General Zia's martial law: The party adopted a clear stance about them when Benazir Bhutto declared that such leaders stood expelled from the party for life and would never be taken back.<sup>23</sup> Nusrat Bhutto actually named at least two such 'quislings' namely Maulana Kausar Niazi and Kamal Azfar who had to be expelled because both were alleged to have been working on a hidden agenda that was injurious to the interests of the party.<sup>24</sup> This indicated that the party was fracturing from inside and although the chairperson tried to dispel the impression about disunity in the party ranks<sup>25</sup> along with a few others such as the Deputy Secretary General off PPP Sindh Abdul Ghafoor Bhurgari<sup>26</sup>, the fact of the matter was that the disunity within the party was an issue. That is why not only Benazir Bhutto repeatedly insisted on unity and solidarity in the rank and file<sup>27</sup> {26} but a high level joint meeting of the Provincial Committee Sindh and the Working Committee Sindh also demanded unity in the party.<sup>28</sup>

#### Efforts for restoration of democracy

Managing the issues of the party leadership and organization was one thing, conducting an effective politics to confront an overbearing regime and keep intact public support was another challenge in the aftermath of the execution of its

chairman. Mr. Bhutto's figure was too big for anyone in the PPP to fill his place. No one was sure about the manner of politics that the party would conduct and the direction that the new leadership would give to its workers and supporters. Mrs. Nusrat Bhutto as the new chairperson and Benazir Bhutto as an important leader decided to run the party on the guiding principles of their late chairman. The central leadership and particularly the provincial leaderships of Punjab and Sindh reiterated that PPP was a revolutionary and anti-imperialist party<sup>29</sup> which would continue the mission of Mr Bhutto<sup>30</sup> ---the mission being to end poverty and bestow respect on the poor.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, not only the party eulogized the singular contribution of Mr. Bhutto for the establishment of Pakistan's nuclear programme but also emphasized that he sacrificed his life for the sake of this programme.<sup>32</sup> In addition, to retain its support among the poor sections of the society-the peasantry in the rural areas and the workers in the urban areas-the president of the party in Punjab Sheikh Rafiq Ahmed declared during his tour of the province that "there would be no room for feudal lords and capitalists in the party."<sup>33</sup>

To win the sympathy of the masses, it smartly played the 'victimization card.' The strategy adopted was to portray President Zia as the destroyer of the party, who adopted various means to achieve his nefarious designs such as the elimination of Z.A Bhutto, imprisonment and lashing of workers, confiscation of properties, disqualification of leaders, appointment of Election Commission (EC) of his choice and delimitation of the constituencies to block the victory of PPP in the November 1979 general elections promised by him.<sup>34</sup> Next, it demanded of the government to release its detained leaders and workers, withdraw the politically motivated cases from the Disqualification Tribunals,<sup>35</sup> dissolve the Military Courts and transfer the cases to civil courts.<sup>36</sup> To show the party's complete mistrust of Zia, who had assumed the power to personally review the cases of the politicians disqualified from taking part in politics, the party's high command warned its disqualified politicians not to file review petitions before Zia and if anybody violated this party policy, not only was such person to be not awarded party ticket to contest the upcoming general elections but was to be debarred from holding any party office, however, it added that such persons could seek relief through writ petitions.<sup>37</sup>

The PPP also adopted a policy of non-cooperation towards the government whereby it would not enter into any talks with the government except on the holding of general elections.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, when the regime announced the formation of Zakat and Ushr Committees, the party directed its members not to join these committees and threatened to kick those out of the party who would dare to violate this policy.<sup>39</sup>

The party also tried to pressurize the government by launching criticism over its policies. As the party claimed to be the upholder of the rights of the working class, it criticized the denationalization policy of the regime<sup>40</sup> and demanded the release of all the imprisoned industrial workers and trade union leaders.<sup>41</sup> The process of accountability started by the regime was attacked with the argument that it was directed solely against the PPP as almost all of its top leadership was disqualified from politics through the use of this process.<sup>42</sup> The budget presented another opportunity to whip the government. This time the CEC took the lead. It was argued that the budget had been burdensome for the common man because the

wages had not increased in proportion to the rise in prices.<sup>43</sup> The government was accused of lying about inflation which was much higher at 22% than the stated 9%.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, it charged the government of shelving the tractor plant and scrapping the proposed Indus Super Highway project.<sup>45</sup> The Acting Secretary General Farooq Leghari attacked the government for raising the non- development budget and added that during the last two years the government had resorted to foreign borrowing at an interest rate of 16% or above which was very high than the average interest rate of 3.5% under which the PPP borrowed.<sup>46</sup> The party left no opportunity to highlight grievances of public and exposing the shortcomings of the government. The role of PPP Baluchistan can be quoted in this regard. Its Provincial Committee expressed concern over price hike, demanded reinstatement of the retrenched workers and compensation for those landowners whose lands had been acquired by the state for Smungly airport near Quetta.<sup>47</sup>

Even the issues of foreign affairs did not escape its attention especially if these provided an opportunity to put the government under spot. As Pakistan was assisting the US- backed Afghan guerillas in their struggle against the Afghan government, the CEC of the PPP disprove this policy of the government as it demanded of government to follow the non- aligned policy in external affairs and refrain from using the country's territory as a springboard for insurrection against the Afghan state.<sup>48</sup> The party's policy on the Afghan issue was in sharp contrast to the government's policy. It branded the Afghan guerillas as a group of 'vested interest' and termed the Afghan government as 'progressive' which was making efforts to emancipate its downtrodden masses.<sup>49</sup> Benazir Bhutto in a different move accused the Zia government of going soft on India by not protesting over the large scale killing of Muslims in India.<sup>50</sup>

Although the PPP tried to raise the heat against the government whenever an opportunity arose, the 'Bhutto ladies' adopted a pragmatic policy viz-a – viz the martial law regime by avoiding outright confrontation. It was the result of this cautious pragmatism that the party was able to have some political breathing space whereby its leaders were gradually released, the restrictions on open political activities remained enforced yet the party was able to hold its organizational meetings and its top leadership was allowed to travel, meet people and communicate their viewpoint through the press notwithstanding its demand for the repeal of the Press and Publications Ordinance and abolishing of the National Press Trust through which the government muzzled the press at will.<sup>51</sup> Somewhat similar cautious approach was adopted by the party about the role of armed forces in politics. The principle adopted by the PPP in this regard was that it was not against the armed forces,<sup>52</sup> however, it did not approve of its involvement in politics.<sup>53</sup> The cautious pragmatism was also discernable in the stance of the top party leadership towards the Zia regime. To the talk of the 'mass contact campaign' which could variously mean from active political activities to re-energies the party to a protest campaign against the government, Benazir refused to commit herself after her release by stating that she would first consult her colleagues.<sup>54</sup> Months after her release, she refuted the possibility of confrontation with the regime by stating that her party believed in having a "realistic outlook".<sup>55</sup> A similar position was adopted by Mrs. Nusrat Bhutto in her first public appearance after the completion of 'Iddat' when she categorically stated that the

PPP stood for constitutionalism and rejected the policy of confrontation.<sup>56</sup> To a probing question that whether the party would seek revenge of the execution of its chairman, the chairperson said that she would seek justice but not revenge.<sup>57</sup> An equally guarded response was given by the Deputy Secretary General Tikka Khan, who, when asked about the possibility of any direct confrontation with the government, said that he would not comment.<sup>58</sup>

The essence of this policy of political pragmatism was to avoid confrontation with Zia and make him hold the general elections to get back in power because the party was confident that it would win hands down. The strategy was to build pressure on the government to hold free and fair general elections and transfer power to the elected party. That the elections were the top priority of the PPP was revealed by Benazir at her release. The first thing that she said to the newsmen in Karachi was that the party would not hold dialogue with the Zia regime on any issue except the modalities of the general elections and the transfer of power.<sup>59</sup> Later on, she declared that if any leader of the party would enter into any kind of negotiations with the regime, he would be thrown out of the party.<sup>60</sup> The message was loud and clear to all and sundry i.e. within the party, only the 'Bhutto ladies' had the prerogative to talk to the regime and the government could also note that if it wished to talk to the PPP then it had to be the 'Bhutto ladies'. Since Zia had announced to hold the general elections in November 1979, every important fora of the party pressed for the holding of the polls on schedule be it the CEC<sup>61</sup> or the provincial leaderships of Punjab<sup>62</sup> and Sindh.<sup>63</sup> The party oozed with confidence to win the elections and this confidence was expressed through the party resolutions at the central level<sup>64</sup> as well as the provincial level where its Punjab President Sheikh Rafiq Ahmad predicted that they would secure more seats in the next elections than they got in the 1977 elections.<sup>65</sup>

While on one hand the party was upbeat about winning elections, on the other hand, it suspected that President Zia would not hold fair elections<sup>66</sup> because he believed in selection over election<sup>67</sup> and had planned the elections to provide a civilian face to his martial law regime owing to the internal and external pressures to democratize his polity. Benazir feared that as her party was still the most potent of all the political parties, the government could ban it from participation in the polls.<sup>68</sup> She warned the regime that if the elections were held without the PPP, these would be nothing more than a farce<sup>69</sup> and the parliament that would be formed as a result would be a 'fake parliament'.<sup>70</sup> To thwart the chances of rigging, the party demanded an 'independent' Election Commission.<sup>71</sup> When an interviewer asked Benazir as to why she was keen to take part in the elections when neither did she recognize the Zia regime nor did she have confidence in the fairness of the electoral process, she replied that she was contesting polls under 'duress'.<sup>72</sup>

Despite the brimming confidence about the strengths of the party, the PPP was considerably weakened by Zia since he overthrew Z A Bhutto. Whenever the idea of an electoral alliance of the PPP with other political parties was brought up, the party's stance was that it was willing to explore the possibility of cooperation only with like-minded parties for which a four-member committee was set up by the PPP comprising Farooq Leghari (Punjab), Aftab Sherpao (NWFP, now KPK), Yahya Bakhtiar (Baluchistan) and Abdul Fatah Memon (Sindh)<sup>73</sup>, however, when

Farooq Leghari was informed that the PPP Baluchistan had already announced its cooperation with the parties like the Pakistan National Party (PNP), Musawat Party, etc., Mr. Leghari clarified that only the CEC was authorized to take a decision in this regard and added, “No decision in this regard has been taken by the party high command.”<sup>74</sup> He drew a clear line in this regard by stating that the like-minded parties should be progressive in outlook and the PPP would not cooperate with those parties “whose hands are soiled with the blood of “Quaid-e-Awam Bhutto.”<sup>75</sup> Benazir Bhutto completely ruled out any cooperation with the parties in the Pakistan National Alliance (PNA)- the alliance that opposed PPP in the 1977 elections- because she felt that they were collaborators with the Zia regime.<sup>76</sup> A similar hard line about the PNA was adopted by the PPP’s CEC which blamed the PNA for first inviting martial law and later on acting as its overt and covert partners during the last two years.<sup>77</sup>

Before holding the general elections in November 1979, President Zia made an intelligent move by holding Local Bodies (LB) elections first to provide a democratic face to his martial law regime. Like other political parties, the PPP, too, had to decide whether it would take part or boycott the Local Bodies elections. The party was in a quandary. If it took part in these elections it would tantamount to providing legitimacy to the martial law regime and if it boycotted then it would leave the field open for Zia to pack the Local Bodies councils with his sympathizers. The PPP tried to press for a third option. It argued that the Local Bodies was a provincial subject therefore these elections should be conducted by the elected provincial governments which would be formed as a result of the general elections in November 1979.<sup>78</sup> The party used its different platforms to press the government to hold general elections first instead of the (LB) polls. Benazir Bhutto even went to the extent that the urgency on the part of the government to hold LB elections hinted that it had no intention to hold the general elections.<sup>79</sup> When PPP’s pressure tactics did not work, its CEC decided to take part in the (LB) elections so that President Zia could not fill these institutions with his men.<sup>80</sup>

Common sense suggests that General Zia had not snatched power from the PPP to hand it back to the same party after two years as a result of the general elections in November 1979. Though he had seriously dented the party, it still seemed the most popular among all the parties and had elections been held as promised, the possibility of the PPP winning them and forming the government was very much there. Zia was not willing to take chances so he decided to change the rules. Instead of following the usual first- past- the-post system, he decided to hold elections under the principle of Proportional Representation (PR). Under the first-past- the- post system, the candidate that secures the highest number of votes in a constituency becomes winner and PPP being the most popular party was likely to dominate the national and provincial legislatures and form governments whereas under the (PR) system, seats in the legislatures are allocated to the parties accordingly to the total number of votes cast to each party. In this way, even the smaller parties had a chance to have representation in the legislative council and therefore the PPP majorities could be reduced or even turned into minorities. Incidentally, the (PR) system had no precedent in Pakistan.



The PPP could see through the ruse and reacted strongly against the adoption of the (PR) system. Its acting Secretary General Farooq Leghari led the attack by stating that the PR system was planned by the government to nullify his party's certain victory in the elections.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, he pointed out that there was no provision in the constitution that permitted the system of (PR) and if the government initiated any amendment in the constitution in this regard, his party would vehemently oppose it.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, he informed that the party had not received any proposal about the (PR) system and if it did, the final decision would be taken by the CEC. Nonetheless, the party directed its provincial leadership to furnish their views on the (PR) system.

In mid- August 1979, Benazir Bhutto took a strong position against the government on this system. First, she criticized Justice Hamoodur Rehman, who was President Zia's advisor on the constitutional affairs for giving this system which was not even liked by the European democracies. Second, she alleged that this system was meant to 'sabotage' polls, achieve 'positive' results and create 'perpetual instability' for political governments.<sup>83</sup> Thirdly, she stated that her party had decided in principle not to send any reply to Zia's letter which contained this proposal.<sup>84</sup> To keep the government guessing, in a pragmatic move, while addressing the Baluchistan Bar Association, she hinted that even under the (PR) system, the PPP would win<sup>85</sup> because in the 1970 elections the party had grabbed 39% votes, in the 1977 elections it had polled 58% votes and was expected to secure 70% votes in the upcoming general elections.<sup>86</sup>

While the party was grappling the (PR) issue, President Zia made another shrewd move to assert some control over the political parties. He made amendment in the Political Parties Act, 1962 that required all political parties desirous of taking part in the general elections to register with the Election Commission and submit statements of their accounts. The first move that the PPP made at its institutional level was to set up a committee under its Baluchistan party president Yahya Bakhtiar to look into the issue and submit a report to the CEC.<sup>87</sup> At the political front, its Acting Secretary General Farooq Leghari launched a frontal attack by terming the amendment as 'illegal', 'inconsistent' with the constitution, wholly 'mala fide' and 'totally unacceptable' to the people.<sup>88</sup> He put forward the argument that under this amendment the Election Commission could bar any political party from contesting the elections which was contrary to the constitutional provisions because under the constitution only the Supreme Court of the country on a reference could bar a political party and prohibit some of its office bearers from contesting the elections.<sup>89</sup> Later on, the party came up with a more elaborate criticism of these amendments. Its Central Organization decided neither to register nor to submit its statements of accounts for auditing to the Election Commission.<sup>90</sup> Moreover, it said that Section 3- B of the Political Parties Amendment Ordinance, 1979 was in violation of Article- 17 of the constitution that guaranteed fundamental rights whereas Section 36 of the amendments militated against Article 17 (1) and (2) of the constitution of 1973 that guaranteed freedom of association.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, the party did not submit the statements of its account and finances as required under the Political Parties (Audit and Accounts) Rules, 1979 under which every party had to declare its sources of income as received and disposed of with dates since July 5, 1977 rather the party Chairperson Mrs. Nusrat

Bhutto just sent a letter in this regard which the Election Commission refused to accept as a statement of accounts and finance.<sup>92</sup> Ultimately, the party decided not to register itself under the amended Political Parties Act, 1979<sup>93</sup> and although three other political organisations such as the Pakistan National Party (PNP), National Democratic Party (NDP) and PNA had also not registered,<sup>94</sup> technically, the PPP could be debarred from general elections.

While the party was pressurizing the government to withdraw the amendments to the Political Parties Act, it convened a three- day meeting of its leaders, office bearers and those former members of the National Assembly who had not been disqualified from politics by the Disqualification Tribunals at the residence of Begum Bhutto in Karachi at the end of September 1979 to discuss the award of party tickets to the aspirants, who had to deposit each Rs. 1000/- for the National Assembly and Rs. 500/- for the Provincial Assembly tickets, receiving in all about five thousand applications from the ticket aspirants.<sup>95</sup> The party's Policy Making (Inner Cell) comprising Benazir Bhutto, Farooq Leghari, General (Retd) Tikka Khan, Sheikh Mohammad Rafiq, Aftab Sherpao, Ghulam Mustafa Jatoi and Yahya Bakhtiar ( the last mentioned being absent) finalized the list of ticket holders for two hundred National and all Provincial Assemblies seats and directed the nominees to file their nomination papers.<sup>96</sup> Keeping in view the fact that the party had not registered with the Election Commission, who could reject their nomination papers, the party issued explicit directives to its nominees that if their nomination papers were rejected they should file appeals against the rejection on the grounds that (a) amendments in the election laws militated against the spirit of the 1973 constitution, (b) the Election Commission had neither the authority to require registration of political parties nor could it ask them to submit accounts for audits and (c) the contention of the Election Commission that the political parties that had not registered could not put up their candidates had actually no moral, political and legal validity.<sup>97</sup> As expected the Election Commission rejected the nomination papers of all those candidates whose parties had failed to register themselves with the Election Commission. In a rearguard action, the PPP high command demanded the government to grant seven more days so that they could make fresh nominations and warned the government that if the PPP and PNA, who had polled 97.7% of votes between them in the 1977 elections were not allowed to contest the upcoming general elections then that would tantamount to the disenfranchisement of the entire nation.<sup>98</sup>

It seems that President Zia had some totally different political plans for because almost a month before the scheduled elections, he not only announced their indefinite postponement but also banned the political parties as well as the political activities, froze their funds, imposed press censorship and put both the 'Bhutto ladies' in detention again under Martial Law Ordinance No 12 at their residence in Larkana. Thus ended the first round of politics between President Zia and the PPP. In a public announcement, he admitted that perpetual martial law was not the solution of the country's problems and promised to hold elections only "when time is ripe for the people to elect their representatives."<sup>99</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The seven months in 1979 from the execution of Z A Bhutto in April to the postponement of general elections by President Zia in October were a period of tempestuous political activity. If Zia thought that he could make the PPP orphan by executing its charismatic chairman then he was proved wrong because the ‘Bhutto ladies’ remarkably filled the void by providing strong leadership that held the party together and saved it from any splits during this period. If he thought that he could decimate the organizational strength of the party by imprisoning its workers and activists in tens of thousands, he must have been disappointed because the party was able to reorganize and function despite the ban on active public politics. The fact that about five thousand people applied for its election tickets and the party was able to nominate candidates for 200 National Assembly and on all Provincial Assemblies seats under testing circumstances showed that it was ready to bounce back.

President Zia had an upper hand over the PPP in the arena of elections. The party opposed the holding of Local Bodies polls before the general elections but not only could it not stop Zia, it had to participate in those polls as well. The main objective of the party was to see that the general elections were held and power transferred to it but it failed as Zia was able to wriggle out of the elections when he realized that the PPP would be the likely winner. Zia was also successful in playing the game of politics on the wicket of his choice and with the set of rules of his liking in the form of the system of proportional representation and amendments to the Political Parties Act, however, when he realized that the PPP was not willing to play according to his diktat, he wound up the political chessboard. PPP was regaining its strength but was not yet strong enough to compel Zia to take the game to its logical conclusion.

In short, after Fatima Jinnah, mother of the nation, the “Bhutto ladies” emerged as “super political ladies” in Pakistan who ushered in a new era of women activism. It was because of these ladies that their party, the PPP, remained intact. They triggered the movement for democracy and Benazir Bhutto became the first female Prime Minister of Pakistan and the Muslim world. The era from 1979 to 2007 could be termed as an era of women empowerment in Pakistan, mainly thanks to the activism of “Bhutto ladies.”

## References

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