The Controversy on Election Rigging as Reason of Martial Law in Pakistan: An Appraisal of Events from March to July 1977

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The Elections for National Assembly of Pakistan were held on 7th March 1977. Prime Minister ZA Bhutto's ruling Pakistan People's Party (PPP) got a landslide victory. The opposition alliance, Pakistan National Alliance (PNA) did not accept the results of elections. Consequently, a mass movement - Nizam-e-Mustafa Movement (the movement for the system of Prophet) was triggered.Despite the appeasing efforts as well as accommodating actions of Bhutto and democratic wishes of a section of PNA leadership, the movement ended with the imposition of Martial Law in Pakistan on 5th July 1977. Following section is an attempt to analyse the proposals as well as actions of Bhutto which he undertook to appease the movement. With the help of content analysis of the primary sources like autobiographies of involving figures, judicial record, impartial archival records of British government it is maintained that Chief Election Commissioner, instead of appeasing the crisis, increased the controversies to malign Bhutto. A number of Bhutto's offers and concessions did not bear fruits. It waspartly because of the underhand associations of Army Chief General Zia-ul-Haq with a fragment of PNA leadership and in part due to misguidance of his apparent expression of allegiance to Bhutto who was entrapped to his false information. The efforts and desires to resolve electoral crisis through electoral and political means failed in the face of violence and behind the scene trickeries.

Key Words: Election dispute, rigging, movement, negotiations, martial law

On the next day of 1977 Election i.e. 8th March Asghar Khan, President of Tehrik-e-Istiqlal, held a press conference at his residence along with the representatives of other parties of Pakistan National Alliance (PNA). He alleged that elections were 'totally rigged and utterly devoid of all ethical character'. Calling upon the Chief Election Commission to resign he declared that PNA would boycott Provincial Assemblies' elections due two days later on 10th March.[1] Later PNA announced a mass movement - *Nizam-e-Mustafa* Movement (the movement for the system of Prophet). Major demands or objectives of the Movement were the resignation of Prime Minister Bhutto,[2] the scrapping of election results, holding of fresh, free and fair polls, and the removal of the CEC.[3] Taking grave concerns of the PNA's immediate refusal to accept the result of election, within hours of the Asghar Khan's press conference, Prime Minister Bhutto addressed a country wide tele-viewed press conference. He rebutted the rigging accusations and contended that the PNA had been simply unprepared to accept the 'verdict of the people'. He justified PPP's electoral success on the grounds that his policies had received overwhelming end overcome from women voters, urban worker and rural labourers.[4]

On 9th March, 1977, PNA decided for the resignation of the opposition MNAs who had been elected on 7th March.[5] On next day polling for Provincial Assemblies took place amid boycott of PNA that caused low turnout.[6] PNA's strike call on 11th March in Karachi received the spontaneous support of the people.[7] In Bhutto's address on state TV on 12 March along with refutation of the charge of rigging and invitation to the opposition for negotiations there was a clear implication and first offer from Bhutto that he would be prepared to consider fresh election to the provincial assemblies. However, this did not seem acceptable to the PNA,[8] the general council of which declared on 12th March to start agitation from 14 March till meeting of all of their demands.[9]

Despite Bhutto's quick offer for negotiations and re-poll of provincial assemblies some secret hand continued to fuel the fury. Clashes started in different cities on 18th March despite the detention of major PNA leaders. On 9th April the bloody riots erupted in Punjab following the death of 30 persons among traders of Azam Market Lahore.[10] Number of officially confirmed killings was eight. Seventy-seven others were injured. The death toll, according to next day press release of the PNA, increased to thirty-seven. Five more deaths were reported that day from police bullets in Karachi. On the same day 28 prominent opposition leaders were arrested while they were marching in Rawalpindi.[11] The PNA subsequently initiated a Civil Disobedience.[12] In such tension Bhutto on 21st April had to impose martial law in three major cities and restrict civil liberties nationwide.[13] In this situation the UKHC predicted that in the face of the PNA's intransigence it looked hard to see how Bhutto could quickly bring the situation back to normal. In those circumstances one could see possibility of military intervention. However, apparent outlook of armed forces made British diplomats believe that they were very reluctant to take on that role.[14]

Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Raises the Controversies:

Mr. Justice Sajjad Ahmad Jan, the CEC, instead of taking full responsibility for theelection, started to show resentment against the Bhutto government as soon as the dissatisfaction from PNA emerged. On 15th March, he unilaterally opened the records of twenty-four constituencies and started hearing against five federal and two provincial ministers of PPP. On 16 March he directed to start criminal cases against eight presiding officers in constituency 57 Sargodha.[15]Most of all he did not announce the results until 21st of March, deadline prescribed by clause (2) of Article 224 of the Constitution.[16]

CEC in very start (on 10 March) had said that he had not enough powers to compensate election rigging. Amid the protests he sought summary powers to deal speedily with cases where glaring malpractices had been alleged. Bhutto and his ministers whose seats would have been in jeopardy argued this would be like a sword of Damocles hanging over PPP MNAs. The measure would only upset their supporters without satisfying the Opposition. After some discussion about the need to satisfy the public[17]the Representation of the People (Second Amendment) Ordinance 1977 was promulgated onMarch 21, 1977. This was an extraordinary gesture to the Opposition's complaints procured by CEC of gross illegalities. It was unprecedented as normal method of challenging elections had been by filling of election petitions before Tribunals.[18]Thus the CEC only announced the result after Federal Government issued Amending Ordinance XV of 1977 and gave him summary powers. Under the summary powers got from Ordinance XV, the CEC took up twenty-six cases for investigation and set aside the results of six constituencies. Four cases decided by him were later discussed in the verdict of Nusrat Bhutto Case. This action unseated important PPP leaders. He also issued show-cause notices to the former Attorney-General, YahyaBakhtiar, and the Federal Law Minister, Malik Mohammad Akhtar.He then called for the files of eighty-five other constituencies.[19]

Newly elected National Assembly held its inaugural session on 25 March and re-elected Bhutto as Prime Minister. PNA observed the day as Black Day. The Constitution provided for the termination of the previous Cabinet.The swearing in of new cabinet was held on 30 March. Next day brought a disturbing news for PPP's new MNAs. The summary of CEC set aside of the election of HafeezullahCheema, Railways Minister in the preceding PPP Cabinet.[20] These partisan acts of CEC increased the plight of Bhutto instead of resolution of matter.

Bhutto realized in two months that summary powers to CEC did not pacify the PNA. Rather they were used not only to set aside a few of PPP stalwarts' election but also to discredit whole election. He, on May 12, 1977, the day when he announced the referendum propasl in the National Assembly, took away through a presidential ordinance the special summary powers conferred on the CEC. Ten days of the term of this act remained. The withdrawal of summary powers, in PPP's view, was owing to their partial and unfair use by CEC. The reason of withdrawal of summary powers as described by SM Masud, the Minister

of Law and Parliamentary Affairs who moved the bill in National Assembly, was that the government noticed "there were a number of cases which were decided which never materially affected those illegalities or irregularities which did not materially affect the result of the returned candidates, evern election of those returned candidates were declared void by the CEC… This was one side procedure… It was not that other party was represented," even the returned candidate was not given opportunity to defend his case.[21]

In the summary to withdraw the Ordinance Abdul Hafeez Pirzada, Minister for Finance, Planning and Provincial Coordination, cited an example of its unfair operation. The election of RaiHafizullah Tariq from Kamalia, Lyallpur whose lead was 40000 votes was declared null and void merely because at one polling station a few hundred votes had been found bogus. Pirzada requested to rectify the position immediately by withdrawal of summary powers 'to prevent any further injustices'.[22]

Later the withdrawal of summary powers was taken as a move of Bhutto to conceal and protect alleged election fraud. It was alleged that he and his companions, afraid of disclosure of their alleged fruad, withdrew summary powers which helped the legislators of the PPP whose seats were immediately threatened.[23]AK Brohi, federation's counsel, said before the Supreme Court that it was withdrawn so suddenly on the day when complaints against PPP stalwarts were heard and about to be decided.[24] Yahya Bakhtiar, Bhutto's attrorney later, submitted that he was not afaird of facing scrutiny by the CEC, and that the withdrawal of the summary powers had nothing to do with the pendency of his case. Supreme Court maintained that the sudden withdrawal of summary powers gave the impression that they were withdrawn to protect certain important members of the PPP from being unseated.[25]

Bhutto told the Supreme Court that the government withdrew the Act because of negotiations with the PNA.He and his counsel Pirzada also pointed out that act wasrepugnant to the provision of (*ultra vires)* the Constitution and also CEC operated these powers unfairly to the detriment of the returned candidates. While setting aside of the elections of two or three more PPP candidates could not have made any difference to the Government's majority. Bhutto justified the withdrawal also on the ground that the inefficiency of CEC to dispose of all about two dozen complaints which it had received in a period of 60 days. In over 50 days the commission could only dispose of six or seven complaints.[26]

Thus the post-election role of CEC remained biased. As a last mark of his partisan role he left charge of his post instead of taking full responsibility. On 18 June 1977, he left Pakistan apparently for treatment for two months. As expected, he did not rejoin his post.[27]

Proposal for Provincial elections as a Test for Election Fraud

As we have seen that Bhutto, under his desperate desire to pacify the PNA, had quickly offered to negotiate and nullify the provincial elections. He then resorted, in order to calm down the PNA, to grant the CEC summary powers to

annul elections in objectionable constituencies. As another measure to satisfy the PNA, Bhutto government showed readiness for re-election in case the result of re-election of provincial assemblies went against them. Law Minister YahyaBakhtiar declared a proposal for holding new provincial polls to decide whether or not to hold National Assembly polls again.[28]YahyaBakhtiar Formula, as Bhutto coined the proposal, contemplated that elections would be held to the Provincial Assemblies and if the aggregate votes – initially it was aggregate number of seats – were in favour of the Opposition, then the NA elections could be held.[29] On 18 April 1977, PNA rejected this proposal as well.[30]

Offers of Negotiations:

In his attempts to settle the issues through negotiations, Bhutto had first invited PNA to talks in his broadcast speech on 12 March. Then he invited in his first letter to PNA on 15March for talks. On 19 March he again worte a letter to PNA for starting talks. The PNA refused to negotiate on the grounds that Bhutto was inviting for talks on general agenda and did not focus on subject of election.[31] On April 30, Bhutto had a long dailogue with the acting President of the PNA, the Pir of Pagaro. On May 2, PNA replied with a 32-point plan as a basis for a political settlement. The plan suggested dissolution of the National and Provincial Assemblies within a week of agreement, fresh elections within a month of the dissolution, and the resignation of the Prime Minister. The last demand was negotiable and might be dropped in return for firm guarantees of a free and fair election. The Ambassadors of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Libya were associated with these negotiations.[32]

Offer of Special Tribunals

On 27th March speaking on the floor of newly elected National Assembly Bhutto mentioned another resort to pacify the PNA. He told that government had appointed and was prepared to appoint permanent judges of the High Courts to constitute the special Tribunals. He assured that justice would be done if there had been any malpractice or irregularity committed. However in the wake of the PNA's refusal to accept all of his proposals he offered the dialogue calling it not a question of any loss of face. [33] On 2nd May he talked to Mufti Mahmood in Combined Military Hospital Rawalpindi. He offered that PNA might talk to his ministers but Mufti insisted to talk directly with him. The PNA on 3rd May explained that it would be mild if the term of re-election was accepted.[34]On 11 May, Bhutto expressed willingness to negotiate with PNA leadership collectively. He again visited Maulana Mufti Mahmood and NawabzadaNasurullah Khan in jail at Sihala and yielded temporary gains. The promised negotiations, however, were soon overtaken by another proposal of Bhutto for holding a referendum.[35]

Referendum Proposal

The major demand of PNA was re-election. Bhutto, as an alternative solution to this demand, offered for the refrendum that might prove an substitute to

the fresh elections as a means of guaging public opinion. The idea was floated first by Bhutto in the National Assembly on 13th May.[36] Considering the referendum proposal a final measure to resolution of conflict Bhutto dropped the negotiations and PNA leaders were shifted in different jails.[37] Floating the proposal Bhutto said that "I am prepared, in the national interest to offer myself as a sacrifice. Let it be a test case." If people disliked him they might express in the refrendum.[38] He declared that he would let the people decide whether or not he should continue as Prime Minister. Referendum, as acquiesced by generals, looked him so acceptable and practical a solution that he conveyed it to the nation in a special television broadcast. Moreover within 72 hours (on 16 May) of its lodging the proposal was hurriedly adopted through the Seventh constitutional amendment, in a joint session of Parliament.[39] Keeping the practicality of the referendum in view, all information media was used to carry out a scientific and credible campaign to convince the public of their duty to turn-out in large numbers and vote for the Prime Minister.[40]

The Seventh Amendment envisaged that a referendum would be held to show confidence in Bhutto, with elections to follow in the event of a negative vote.[41] In the amendment, the Army's pleasure was also sought by taking away the jurisdiction of the High Courts in respect of action taken by the army from 21 April when called in aid of civil power under Article 245.[42]Sensing the support of army behind him Bhutto had forgotten that the swift amendemnt in the Constitution discredited Bhutto more. For two months, he had resisted the demand for fresh elections on the ground that the Constitution did not allow elections. And now he had the Constitution amended in the twinkling of an eye to provide for an unorthodox expedient.[43]

General Faiz Ali Chishti writes in his book that on 13 May 1977 a meeting of generals that continued to discuss the option of referendum for four hours. CGS Major General Abdullah Malik supported the referendum vigorously. Major General Saadat Ali Khan was deadly against it. Others had middle opinion. General Chishti told that he was against the idea of referendum. He viewed that nation was demanding fresh elections and would not agree with anything less than re-election. At last it was decided that the referendum should not be held. General Zia was requested to convey the decision to the Prime Minister who was about to declare for referendum on the same day. General Zia committed to convey the decision. General Chishti discloses that General Zia did not convey the decision of generals' meeting to Bhutto correctly and conveyed to Bhutto falsely that generals supported referendum. Assured of the army's support behind the proposal of referendum, Bhutto instead of continuing negotiations with PNA declared for referendum. He even warned that after winning referendum he would amend the constitution in such a way that such conditions may not happen again.[44]

Again Turning to Negotiations:

PirPagaro rejected the idea of referendum the following day on behalf of the PNA[45] and threatened to boycott any such move.[46] Meanwhile Bhutto came to know that generals, in consensus, did not support the referendum.[47]With rejection

of referendum from army that wanted fresh election and with same dissent from agitators, the idea of referendum was finally dismissed and negotiations were opted to resolve the crises. On 26th May, through the efforts of the emissaries of Muslim countries, the PNA announced their readiness to resume negotiations, which started in earnest on 3rd June with the mutual acceptance of the release of the Opposition leaders and an end to hostile propaganda as well as rallies.[48] Another conciliatory gesture was lifting of martial law on 7th June. One day ago Bhutto had conceded main demand of holding fresh electionsnext November under a formula receiving final touches by the Government and Opposition leaders.[49]

Discussions then turned to question whether to have fresh polls as proposed by the PNA or re-elections only for the disputed seats. As the first was accepted it was left to Prof. Ghafoor Ahmad, from the PNA side, and HafeezPirzada, from the government side, to work out the details. There were still differences, including whether the polling should be within three months, as demanded by the PNA, or twelve months, as proposed by the PPP.[50] Like other PNA leaders Professor Ghafoor too felt that Bhutto, despite accepting re-election, was prolonging negotiations on the issues of arrangements for their fair holding.[51] On 11th June the PNA demanded elections within thirty days.[52]

On 12 June, the Government presented its own proposal to the PNA. The differences over the election date had been resolved, but SherbazMazari, NasimWali Khan and Asghar Khan, all three considered hard liners, pressed two of their original demands, namely, the withdrawal of troops from Balochistan and the termination of the Hyderabad Tribunal. On both issues, the army, by now deeply involved, proved reluctant to concede.[53] On both of these issues later Zia government conceded. The negotiations, however, continued and, after the ninth round of talks on 15th June, both sides announced that they had reached "agreement on the basic issues and Bhutto that evening told his National Assembly audience that fresh national elections would soon be held in the larger national interests. He also told Soviet Ambassador that 7th October was the date agreed in the negotiations.[54] Prof. Ghafoor Ahmad too writes that in last meeting on 15thJune all basic matters were resolved and a sub-committee comprising himself and Pirzada was formed to settle modalities.[55]

Within the PNA itself there were also disagreements on main demand; its negotiating team did not press for the Prime Minister's resignation, while those outside insisted on it. Likewise, the negotiating team did not press for the Prime Minister's resignation, while those outside insisted on it. Prof.Ghafoor along with KausarNiazi, Bhutto's minister, addressed a press conference in optimistic terms about an agreement. At the same time, however, Asghar Khan told the Press separately that any agreement was worthless unless all the details were settled; both he and SherbazMazari insisted on Bhutto agreeing to all the thirty-two original demands of the PNA.[56] On 18th June, 1977 while Pirzada, on behalf of government, announced agreement on general polls in the first half of October 1977. Prof. Ghafoor said with hope that minor differences still persisted would be resolved.[57]

From 18 to 23 June Bhutto remained on five-nation tour of Middle East states, though government PNA settlement still not signed. KausarNiazi, disclosing the reason of Bhutto's sudden foreign visit, writes that Bhutto went abroad to collect funds for elections decided in the talks.[58] During this period some secret and open hands were active to sabotage the negotiations. Pirzada adopted provocative behavior in sub-committee and Niazi postponed important decision about Kashmir elections till the return of Bhutto. The negotiations resumed on 23 June, the day when Bhutto returned and the impasse in sub-committee ended. Bhutto again declared that there was agreement on basic points.[59] On 25th June, 1977, in 11th round of talks main differences over date of election and powers of implementation council; code of ethics for poll were considered; Government presented its draft proposal to PNA.[60]

After a night-long session on July 2-3, an agreement was finally announced after Bhutto did a last minute switch-step, agreeing to chair a PPP-PNA super cabinet with a casting vote in case of an evenly divided disagreement.[61] The accord was subject to approval by the Central Council of the PNA. When it was referred to the Council the next day, the PNA's legal experts found legal loopholes in it. They thought the implementation committee would be a practically impotent body and Bhutto would be left free to use the administrative apparatus to manage the polls.[62] The PNA, accordingly, suggested ten additional safeguards to ensure free and fair elections. All of these demands were so minor that Bhutto was ready to agree but to save face insisted he would first have to consult his own party and cabinet.[63]He viewed that after finalization of accord, matter could not be reopened. Even then he was willing to meet PNA representatives who stated that the points raised after agreement had been reached, were not new.[64]

In PNA some hard liners had secret contacts with generals. They threatened for martial law. The army was in fact playing behind the screen. Asghar Khan, opposing the negotiations, had guaranteed in PNA council that army would arrange elections within 90 days of enforcement of martial law. He had openly called for armed forces in support of agitation. Daily *Jang* dated 5 May had reported that Asghar Khan wrote a letter to the Pakistan Army Chiefs of Staff to defy the Bhutto government. The adjournment motion on this subject was moved in National Assembly on 12 May. Tikka Khan, newly appointed minister, told the Assembly that government had some indication on the 2nd May when BBC telecast this news item. Radio Australia and Voice of America had advance message of this happening as they telecast it on 3 May. Bhutto called this action high treason, violation of the Army Act and violation of Constitution. The government, Bhutto explained, was not happy to involve the army in the matter and call of army on 21st April was a last resort to maintain law and order only.[65]

Keeping the association of their colleagues with army, PNA's negotiators (Mufti Mahmood, Prof. Ghafoor and NawabzadaNasrullah) wanted accord as soon as possible. On 3rd July Sardar Abdul Qayyum told KausarNiazi to inform Bhutto that some of their colleagues in PNA were in contact with Army. SardarQayyum and Mufti Mahmood wanted to have meeting with Bhutto to convey this. Niazi

delivered this message to Bhutto. However Bhutto did not pay heed.[66]He, on the evening of 4th July called cabinet meeting joined by all chief ministers, chiefs of armed forces, ISI Director and General Zia and told them he would "break the deadlock" next day.[67]

Prof. Ghafoor contends with reference to Ghulam Mustafa Jatoi that in 4th July cabinet meeting General Zia ensured Bhutto for his full support. Apparently that was one of reasons why Bhutto was hard in his press conference where he gave impression that PNA had given ten new demands and a deadlock had been there.[68] Same was the reason of Bhutto's paying no heed to the warnings of the PNA's negotiating team. Things were not as clear as Bhutto thought. Outside the negotiations field, the tension was growing and fears of large-scale outbursts of violence filled the air.[69] That was an excuse which General Zia used to impose martial law after half an hour of the meeting with his Prime Minister.

To General Chishti, during PNA movement Bhutto could not declare the elections due to two reasons. The world will say that he had rigged the elections. How would history remember him? This contention is not correct as we have seen frequent evidences that Bhutto was ready for re-elections. Secondly his close companions (Federal Ministers) forbade him. This is also refutable because Bhutto was in full control of his cabinet and party but unaware of the designs of General Zia. The only way to resolve this inexplicable issue was that he should invite the army to take over but it would be his political death. He understood this and was not prepared to do so.[70]

Bhutto remained accommodating throughout the *Nizam-e-Mustafa* Movement. He accommodated even the religious demands of enforcement of Islamic laws. Friday was declared as weekly holiday. The legislation on the prohibition of intoxicating materials, prevention of gambling was done to retort the religious demands which were fabricated by the PNA in order to provoke religious fervor and sentiments of people as motives in support of their electoral demands.[71]The accommodating display of Bhutto in religious arena, his negotiable offers to appease the agitators, and even his acceptance of all major demands after frank confession of partial rigging could not muddle through the demonstrators who were secretly supported by the military. Even the sincere efforts of reconciliation and formation of consensus rules to prevent future rigging on the behest of doves in PNA could not bear fruits.

All said and done the election issues, which were used as a pretext to create agitation, were not the whole reason for the imposition of martial law. On the day when the army came into action ,the rigging on minor scale had been accepted by Bhutto through his actions of negotiation. In the parleys, both he and PNA leaders had agreed to re-elections. Both parties had conceded the election rules and system which guaranteed fair elections in future. The minor points of difference could be resolved within some days provided the military did not intervene. A number of elements point to the fact that there was underhand collaboration between hardliners in the PNA and the military. General Zia's behavior also supports this narrative.

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