

FROM POPULISM TO POLITICAL POLARIZATION: BHUTTO'S ROLE IN SHAPING MODERN PAKISTANI POLITICS

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Abstract

This article traces Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's impact on modern Pakistani politics and assesses how his brand of populism bequeathed a polity referred to even now for its deeply polarized political landscape. The historical and political setting of Bhutto's rise is in the backdrop of post 1971 war, national disillusionment and his masses appeal through charismatic leadership and populist rhetoric. It argues that Bhutto's (socialist, Islamist, anti-elite) policies changed the face of political contestation in Pakistan not only, but also left a legacy of divisive politics, emotionally charged electoral campaigns and personality driven party structures. These dynamics have helped in generating a polarized and present political discourse. The article specifically analyses the values of mass mobilization, political institutionalization, civil military relations and ideological narratives. It looks at how the centralization of authority, sidelining of dissent, and instilling of a cult of personality all became aspects of state policy that were partly emulated by and partly reacted to by many later leaders, including civilian and military ones, who followed Bhutto. The article argues that it is a double-edged sword legacy because, on one hand, Bhutto made political participation democratic, but, on the other, he gave rise to political division and ideological extremism. This article provides a nuanced view of how it is, after all these years, Bhutto's populism continues to inform the development of Pakistani politics, not as a piece of history, but as both inspiration and controversy.

Key Words

Politics, Z. A Bhutto, Socialist,

Introduction

No history of modern Pakistani politics is complete without appreciation of the towering political philosophy and leadership of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who rewrote the ideological, social and institutional structures of the country. Bhutto rose when the UK was going through a period of national crisis in 1971 with the disintegration of East Pakistan and offered a strong alternative to the traditional political and ruling elite by using the populist slogans like 'Roti, Kapra aur Makaan' (bread, clothing and shelter). He brought the politics out of the hands of elites and to the people; the appeal to passion, the emphasis on getting the people involved, this was mass politics, this was appeal to emotional not the rational, this was from the elite to the people, this was not a dialogue. What allowed Bhutto to do that, was his ability to get public opinion behind him, and to use that to rapidly build the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) into a potent challenger to the status quo, and into a redefinition of political discourse in the country.

Bhutto's Islamic populism was synthesized and utilized as a shrewd tool of popular appeal to a broad base of Pakistani society. He framed an Islamic politics based on invoking Islamic values by promising socio-economic reform in order to create a hybrid political discourse that resonates with both the urban working class and rural poor. The PPP's rise was greatly helped by his charismatic leadership and oratory skills, to the point where he also became the leader's cult of personality. Yet, in this case it also brought a type of emotional politics that sidelined institutional development in favour of leader centric loyalty. The delegitimization of political opposition was often de-legitimized by labelling it enemies of the people or the state, thereby undermining the development and fostering of an increasingly met front and polarized political culture.

During the course of Bhutto's rise to power, his policies began to incorporate the combination of progressive reform and authoritarian control. While his government had major land reforms, nationalized key industries, and attempted to give labour unions power, he also limited press freedoms, squashed dissent and centralized control. Bhutto's complicated legacy depends on the way that this paradox of populism and repression is read: that is, this is the critical thing. His leadership style was based on personal charisma and populist theatrics, rather than fostering democratic institutions that are inclusive, that provides checks on institutional figures residing within the greater organizational backdrop of the institution, and that contests political dependency on individual leaders. Such a cult of Bhutto would continue to haunt Pakistan politics, replicated and contested by subsequent governments and oppositions.

Populist politics of Bhutto are yet to be felt today. Such was his political mobilization based on emotional rhetoric, identity politics, and anti-elitist rhetorics that have now quid become a template for most of modern political actors in Pakistan. Bhutto's plays have been drawn on by leaders across the political spectrum from military-backed regimes to populist civilian leaders in a political environment where issues are not only second to personalities, but extreme ideologies. Paradoxically, the democratic space that Bhutto was willing to expand has become an arena of the most virulent and polarising politics in contemporary Pakistan.

However, arguing that Bhutto's populism, which was at the beginning transformative and inclusive, was at the end antithetical to political culture, with loyalty, rather than merit, confrontation, rather than consensus, and charisma rather than institutional continuity, this article demonstrates. The legacies of such a man are not merely historical, his divisions continue to shape the structural and ideological fractures in modern day Pakistan. By looking at the evolution of Bhutto's political strategies over the course of his tenure, of its long-term impact, this study will try to understand how Bhutto's tenure helped establish a tradition of emotionally charged, whilst leader centric politics and helped undermine democratic institutions and build political polarization.

To take this argument in further detail, the article will first study the historical setting, development and rise of Bhutto's populist politics; second the type of his politics of governance, its reformative policies and authoritarian propensities; and third the crucial variables, i.e., the mass mobilization, ideological rhetoric and civil military relations which have collectively maintained Pakistan's polarized political landscape. This article through this structure offers a complete and critical analysis of Bhutto's impact on Pakistan's political history.

Research Methodology

The research methodology used in this article is qualitative and is based mostly on historic and interpreting methods dealing with Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's contribution to modern Pakistani politics. Tracing the development of his populist narrative and political strategies, it relies primarily on speeches of Bhutto, party manifestos, government documents and contemporary newspaper reports. It also looks at how scholarly books, journal articles, political commentary situated Bhutto's policies within prevailing theoretical frameworks of populism and political polarization.

Thematic approach is used by the study to analyse significant variables: mass mobilization, ideological discourse, institutional change as well as civil military dynamics. The research aims to establish a link between Bhutto's political legacy and current trends of a polarization in Pakistan by critically assessing these themes. By exploring this phenomenon in terms of the socio-political transformation through the influence of Bhutto's leadership, this methodology helps to get a deeper understanding of the socio-political impact of Bhutto's leadership and provides a fairer evaluation of Bhutto's influence over Pakistan's contemporary political class.

Literature Review

This scholarship is extensive on Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's political philosophy, governance style, and legacy in Pakistan's political culture. Since then, scholars have often considered Bhutto as a populist and authoritarian figure whose charismatic leadership alongside his socialist agenda forged new political participation in post 1971 Pakistan (Ahmed, 2004).

In his book, *Levelling Crowds: Sultana Us Politics and the Rise of Populist Movements in South Asia*, Stanley J. Tambiah looks to explain the origins of populist and nationalist politics in South Asia and places the leaders of populism Zulfikar Ali Bhutto being one among them in a wider historical context. Tambiah maintains that populist leaders typically emerge in such crises of society and espouse emotional rhetoric, direct mass appeal, and confrontational politics to gain authority. It serves as a helpful tool in unpacking the strategy that Bhutto played out to their disenfranchised masses through socialist slogans and anti-elitist discourse. However, as Tambiah's work shows, such leaders are unstable, their politics shying away from institutional frameworks and towards personalization of power, which was also at the heart of the following deep political polarization in Pakistan (Bhutto, 1979).

The political economic history of Pakistan, with special reference to Bhutto's regime, is covered in detail in *Pakistan a Nation in the making* by Shahid Javed Burki. Critiquing Bhutto's economic policies, Burki takes issue in particular with the widespread nationalization and land reforms that marked her economic policies as economically disruptive and administratively inefficient. Burki acknowledges that Bhutto had a real desire for the redistribution of justice, but claims that these policies were badly implemented and became detrimental for long-term economic growth. Burki moreover associates these policies with Bhutto's populist politics, arguing that the effort to bring popular expectations to heel by means of radical policies eroded state institutions and boosted a confrontational political culture that continues to haemorrhage political division in Pakistan today (Burki, 1980).

This is played out in Christophe Jaffrelot's *the Pakistan Paradox: Instability and Resilience* where Bhutto's populism is described as politically opportunistic and ideologically ambiguous. Jaffrelot stresses that as a product of mutual fusion of Islamic values with leftist slogans, as for instance 'Islam is our faith, socialism is our economy,' Bhutto tried to bring not only a democratic polity, but also united a fractured society under the umbrella of his charismatic charisma. On the other hand, Jaffrelot suggests that this ideological hybrid was not always consistent and exposed the future ideological confusion and strife to come. Most importantly, Bhutto simultaneously politicized religion and class struggle, leading to a political culture rife with identity politics that have been easily politicized further and exploited for political gain, as have been done in the future (Wolpert, 1993).

In Ayesha Jalal's *The Struggle for Pakistan*, Bhutto is seen as a key player in the history of the civil-military relation and the dispute between democracy and autocracy. After East Pakistan broke up, Jalal sees Bhutto's role in challenging military dominance and, through parliamentary democracy, in place of the military. She also faults Bhutto's centralization of power and his use of repressive tactics against political opponents, the judiciary and the press, however. It is very important to Jalal's analysis in order to understand how, on one hand, Bhutto democratized while on the other hand undershooting democratic norms, thus helping create an environment in which political polarization, mistrust and institutional erosion became the norm and not an exception (Jalal, 1995).

In *Pakistan: Between Mosque and Military*, Husain Haqqani looks at Bhutto's dealings with religious groups and the consequences of his efforts to appease Islamist groups for Pakistan's long term ideological polarization. Haqqani recalls that although Bhutto preached secular socialism, he manoeuvred to fit in with religious factions by, among other things, declaring Ahmadis non-Muslims and banning alcohol. Haqqani says these measures were ideologically at odds with each other but politically expedient and thus compromised the boundaries between

religion and state. This ambiguity was a precedent for General Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization policies and entrenched sectarian and religious line in Pakistani politics, which continue to be very visible today.

In Asian Survey, Saeed Shafqat gives a critical account of how Bhutto undermined the objectivity of bureaucratic agencies, judicial independence, and legitimacy of the state institutions with his populist tactics. Shafqat said that Bhutto's centralization of power and marginalization of opposition lent itself to an adversarial political culture in which opposition figured as not democratic contestation but treason. Bhutto's personality of addressing politics in his own way and suppressing institutional checks, Bhutto had left a legacy of confrontation, interpreting what defence ministry records mentioned as deepening civil military tensions, he adds. Shafqat's findings are important in tying Bhutto's populism to the lengthier deterioration of institutional capability and the rise of political sectarianism (Nasr, 2001).

In his research in Modern Asian Studies, Ian Talbot shows how Bhutto's support base was regional and how ethnic mobilization underlay Bhutto's populist politics. This is to underscore exactly how it was Bhutto's strongest support that came from the Punjab and Sindh, where he personally pulled together class and regional grievances to create a loyal constituency that would serve him well. Talbot also notes, however, that this is a strategy that alienated ethnic minorities in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa that widened intra provincial fissures and contributed towards further fragmentation of the national identity. However, the ethnic dimension in the Bhutto discourse of populism further complicated political polarization in still divisive terms as the region began to intermingle with the national bears (Rizvi, 2000).

Discussion

Populism as Political Entry: Bhutto's Emergence and Mass Appeal

At a time of economic and national trauma following the 1971 breakup of Pakistan and disillusionment with military rule, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto entered Pakistan's political scene. His populism was not just a campaign tactic to rally people in the PPP in 1967 and promote his rallying cry of "Roti, Kapra aur Makaan" but was a considered political ideology. He appropriated the language of workers, peasants, and urban poor, and dressed the PPP as the voice of the dispossessed against the feudal and bureaucratic order. He focused on people-centric governance and pledged to break the elitist structures, which got him tremendous popular support and completely transformed the face of politics in Pakistan (Anzalone, C. 2023).

At the time, Bhutto's message was revolutionary. Bhutto's appeal, unlike the traditional Muslim League elite, was a national platform for those marginalized by linguistic, ethnic, and class divides. The powerful ability of this to combine anti imperial rhetoric and socialist ideals, at a time when the world around him was alienated by capitalist inequality and military elitism gave hope to a generation of disillusioned, young people. It was important that Bhutto redefined what it meant to be a 'leader of the people' in Pakistan. This seemed to create a cult of personality around him by campaigning with fiery speeches, street contact and symbolic actions. This was popped up with the ideology and charisma which has ever been unmatched in the history of politics of Pakistan (Flores, A., et al. 2024).

Statecraft and Charisma: Personalization of Power

Bhutto's populism turned into the personalization of power, gone was populism. He presented himself as the only true advocate of the people and often in emotional polarizing language peaceable his opposition as illegitimate. But his style as a leader was energetic and visionary but not institutional. Especially after democratization, loyalty to the leader took precedence over loyalty to democratic procedures. Thus, this shift eroded Pakistan's institutional framework and set in motion political centralization that would be carried forward by both

civilian and military regimes. In the place of developing democratic culture, Bhutto's strategy led the country to follow a populist line characteristic of the modern populism of which it is now heavily infected (Allcott, H., et al. 2024).

As Bhutto grew more personal, criticizing him became synonymous with betraying him. Senior party leaders were alienated by his top-down style and his ruthlessly suppressed dissent along with said collective decision making. He concentrated the party around his personal loyalty rather than on promoting an agenda of inclusive policy making. Bhutto's central role in all policy successes, even the achievement of the 1973 Constitution, was emphatically emphasised. The PPP never developed as a democratic institution partly because this cult-like leadership model made it very difficult for the party to diversify from such dependence. This in turn led to such personality-based politics becoming the norm in future governments.

Institutional Erosion and Democratic Backsliding

Bhutto, however, made claims of promoting a democratic revolution but behaved dictatorially during his governance. The dismissal of senior judges, among other actions that signalled a drift away from democratic norms, were characteristic of his interference in the judiciary and bounds on press freedom. He brought state mechanisms under his control and proceeded to suppress dissent within and outside his party. Mass opposition was spurred in the 1977 elections marred by allegations of rigging and exposed the fragile tenure of Bhutto's democratic credentials. General Zia-ul-Haq's military coup intervened in 1977 and effectively undid democracy progress, but this was the result of 'a climate of repression and resistance.' Nevertheless, had been sown under Bhutto the seeds of institutional distrust and polarization.

Bhutto also weakened institutions and a power vacuum was left that future regimes would exploit. Bhutto's mishandling of the judiciary, treatment of the press and parliamentary debate all seem to have diminished the importance and power of each respectively to the point that they normalized executive overreach. These were not so much setbacks when they first happened, but instead institutional habits. The same means was then used by subsequent leaders both civilian and military to control dissent and short circuit checks and balances. Hence, Bhutto brought mass politics that would, in turn, foster chronic institutional dysfunction in Pakistan's politics (Marcus, G. E., Neuman, W. R., & MacKuen, M. 2000).

Populism Meets Religion: Strategic Concessions and Long-Term Costs

Strategic religious adjustments marked Bhutto's populism. A secular/modernist by orientation in general, he made allowances for Islamist factions in order to gain political legitimacy. It included declaring Ahmadis as non-Muslims in 1974, banning alcohol, and adopting Friday as a weekly holiday. However, such moves gave short term political gain, but encouraged religious parties and legitimized the role of the state in religion, which eventually undermined Pakistan's secular foundations. The combination of the two, populism and religious nationalism, opened a volatile dynamic in the polity that plays a substantial role in the ideological and sectarian polarization of modern Pakistan.

Although these religious measures proved politically expedient on the surface, they ultimately made structural impacts. The door was opened to religious parties to secure political influence well beyond the numbers those parties could muster at the ballot box. By playing out into a death, Bhutto blurred the line between religious populism and statecraft, essentially making the preservation of secular governance increasingly difficult for future leaders. Many of these trends were institutionalized later by General Zia-ul-Haq, but they took shape under Bhutto's predisposition to give up on the secular principles for pulling crowds. Where religion is concerned, this permanently altered the ideological fabric of Pakistan, and one that is often overtly divisive (Jalal, A. 1995).

Politics of Polarization: Bhutto and His Opposition

Increasing polarization of the political arena was the result of Bhutto's confrontational style. His rule was divisive: His intolerance of opposition, especially during the 1977 PNA movement. Bhutto, instead of discussing with political adversaries, had devised a strategy of discrediting them by proving them out to be the agents of the elite of the foreign conspiracies. This zero-sum approach to politics helped establish a trend where political opponents are demonized, which is something that is still prevalent in the debate in Pakistan where political opponents become perceived as enemies of their nation. What Bhutto helped to ignite, however, was a permanent trait in the political landscape: polarization.

This political polarization was quite dramatic during the 1977 crisis. Without reforming the system or true dialogue, the Pakistan National Alliance was met by Bhutto taking a defiant stance. It led to civil unrest and as a result, justified military intervention in the name of national stability. Building consensus or tolerating dissent became an unwillingness to do and a long-term erosion of political civility written into the political culture. This combative, accusatory approach is still mirrored by rival parties in Pakistan today, and today parties across Pakistan still tend to see clash instead of compromise as signs of strength.

Enduring Legacy in Contemporary Pakistani Politics

Bhutto still shaped Pakistan's political culture, which is still very much alive. He has also been a template for future leaders to use populist rhetoric but to leapfrog institutions, emotional mass mobilization over consensus building, and religious symbols to consolidate power. Is there a populist legacy to be found in promoting this in the first place, from the political figures who built upon it from Benazir Bhutto to Imran Khan, cycles of institutional fragility, mass polarization and political instability? The Bhutto time is the beginning of the contemporary tendency to foist street power over parliamentary dialogue and of leader over policy politics. Bhutto's political methodology thus transcends legacy: from a model of empowerment as well as of caution (Nasr, S. V. R. 2001).

This is also a legacy of this that explains as to why the many political transitions in Pakistan remain incomplete or contested. Bhutto often inspires populist leaders about reformism, who nonetheless sink into centralization, patronage politics and anti-institutional modes of behaviour in power. Additionally, the symbolic aspect of Bhutto's leadership, and again specifically the martyrdom of his leadership through death by execution in 1979 (the year he launched his grand coalition) lends a mythic dimension to his legacy which makes a difficult, or critical engagement with his political workings difficult for many. Bhutto then was and stays a visionary vanguard and a deeply polarizing personality, whose shadow continues to stir the very course of Pakistan's political development (Rizvi, H. A. 2000).

Conclusion

Thus, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's political life was a paradox, a leader of democracy who destroyed the foundations of democracy, with political centralization, populist speech, and political intolerance. His rise represented a moment of hope for oppressed groups, a view of social justice and a national renewal. At the same time, the very means by which he attracted mass appeal—personal charisma, populism, and ideological flexibility—would also help sow the seeds of long-term political polarization. It marked the beginning of a trend where he was ready to undermine institutional checks, suppress dissent and manipulate religious sentiments for political ends which continue to shape Pakistan's political culture till date.

Bhutto's legacy is thus twofold. On the one hand, he brought about the democratization of political participation through the efforts to mobilize the masses and confront the entrenched elites. On the other he set the tone for power politics that is based on personalization, polarization, and populism, confrontation, which was then copied later in Eastern Europe and

Central and Eurasia. His strategic concessions to religious groupings effectively demolished the proper relationship amongst faith and state and his authoritarian reflexes in governance eroded democratic establishments. These decisions lead far beyond his time with recurring political crises, civil military tensions, and the perpetuation of democratic ideals and populist governance.

The trajectory of modern Pakistani politics needs to be unpeeled from an understanding of Bhutto's role. This reveals how even appealing leadership style and political approach designed to gain popular support can embed a systemic unbalance. To the extent that Bhutto left anything whatsoever, not just the story of a great man spreader, there is the legacy of a polarized state that bears its imprint to this day.

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