



Why Democracy Failed in Pakistan

By Nasim Yousaf

In 1947, Pakistan and India emerged on the world map. While both states were born from similar circumstances, a stark contrast has developed between the two nations today. On one hand, India has successfully established a strong democracy and is poised to play a prominent role on the world stage in the years to come. On the other, Pakistan has thus far completely failed as a democratic state. The question then becomes, why was Pakistan unable to emerge as a stable democracy? The response to this query lies in the circumstances surrounding the formation of the nation. In examining the birth of Pakistan, one discovers a shocking truth: the All-India Muslim League (AIML) – which has been credited with the independence of Pakistan – was itself an undemocratic organization. A closer examination of the role of the Muslim League in the years leading up to – and following – independence in 1947 reveals why such a party could not have fostered a true democracy in Pakistan.

Historical evidence shows that, from the very beginning, the Muslim League lacked some of the most fundamental tenets of a well-structured political organization: (i) a genuine program for the welfare of the masses, (ii) members from the public, who elect local and national leaders at regularly held intra-party elections, and (iii) a grassroots following. Instead, the AIML was more of a club comprised of Nawabs, Khan Bahadurs, and titled gentry. It was no surprise then that the organization failed miserably in the 1937 provincial elections, even losing in Muslim majority areas.

Having lost the 1937 elections, AIML leaders knew that they needed to take drastic action in order to generate support among the masses. They thus decided to bring communalism and Islam into politics in an attempt to gain favor among the Muslims. It is important to note that prior to the elections, the AIML leadership had supported the need for *unity* between Muslims and Hindus; so, their change in policy at this juncture is a clear indication that they wanted to utilize communalism to manipulate the sentiments of the Muslim masses. As Barrister Aftab Iqbal (son of Allama Iqbal) would write, the League was controlled by “a few half educated, selfish and ambitious Nawabs and Muslim capitalists from Muslim minority provinces under the leadership of Mr. Jinnah...[who exploited] the ignorance and poverty of the Muslim masses” (*The Tribune*, Lahore, July 25, 1946).

In order to further their communalist agenda, on March 24, 1940, the AIML passed the Pakistan Resolution (also known as the Lahore Resolution), which called for a two-state

solution in the Indian subcontinent. The adoption of this resolution increased the rift not only among the Muslims, but also between Muslims and Hindus, and greatly helped the AIML to establish its position on the political pitch. According to *The Hindustan Times* of April 30, 1940, Arbab Abdul Rahman (Member Legislative Assembly, NWFP) stated that the “Pakistan scheme was an absurdity... He [Rahman] condemned the false cry of ‘Islam in danger’ raised by the Muslim League...Muslim Leaguers had raised the bogey of Islam in danger in order to secure ministerships.” Thus, despite having failed in the 1937 elections, the League was nevertheless able to gain political standing by using communalism and religion to generate dissension between the Muslims and Hindus, which in turn increased their power as the Muslim “representatives.”

Following the passing of the Pakistan resolution, the League maintained its less than democratic practices. For instance, although the League began holding regular elections, strangely there was no change in the main leadership. Those who watched the AIML closely felt that they were guilty of discriminatory politics. As well-known author Ghulam Kibria would write in the *Dawn* on July 14, 2004, “many League leaders... sought to rig them [the elections]. This tradition continued to be followed till 1947. Proof? Those elected as the League's president, general secretary, treasurer and members of the working committee and council in 1937 continued to be re-elected till 1947.” The League’s undemocratic nature was further validated by a statement by A.K. Fazl-ul-Haq, a prominent Muslim League leader who had moved the Pakistan Resolution in March, 1940, but then resigned in protest of the League’s power structure. According to *The Tribune* of September 11, 1941, “Huq stated...[that the] principles of democracy and autonomy in the All-India Muslim League were being subordinated ‘to the arbitrary wishes of a single individual [Quaid-e-Azam], who seeks to rule as an omnipotent authority even over the destiny of thirty-three millions of Muslims in the province of Bengal, who occupy the key position in Indian Muslim politics.’”

It was becoming clear that the Muslim League members were more interested in power for themselves than in genuinely representing the masses. Cognizant of the AIML’s suspect practices and lack of representation of the poor, Allama Mashraqi (founder of the Khaksar Tehrik) offered a suggestion. Speaking to the press on September 25, 1945, Mashriqi stated:

“...I proposed to Mr. Jinnah that in order to make Muslim League representative of Musalmans in any sense he should agree to my most modest proposal of giving, out of 40%, only ten percent to poor Musalmans and 5% to Shiah, leaving 25% to Khan Bahadurs and other well-to-do individuals who overwhelm the Muslim League, otherwise, I told him, the Khaksars will help the poor Musalmans to fight for their rights, as they constituted more than 95 percent of the Muslim population...”

I as well as all the Khaksars will join the Muslim League [an offer that had been put forth to Mashriqi] only if Mr. Jinnah allows us into his fold, as then he will not be able to have everything for the flatterers round him and for himself alone” (*Al-Mashriqi: The Disowned Genius* by Syed Shabbir Hussain, p. 219).

Thus, Mashraqi's proposal suggested greater representation of the poor in the Muslim League. Although his proposal seemed reasonable, the attitude of the AIML leadership remained unchanged. If the AIML had been genuinely democratic and concerned about the welfare of the masses, why did it refuse to allow greater representation for poor Muslims in the League?

The AIML's undemocratic ways continued throughout the 1946 elections. During the course of these elections, AIML members deliberately and unflinchingly sabotaged their political opponents. For instance, one of the League's primary opponents during these elections was the Khaksar Tehrik. League members thus began spreading rumors and propaganda against the Tehrik. Furthermore, the League hired mobsters to disrupt Allama Mashriqi and the Tehrik's public meetings, including throwing furniture, beating attendees from the public with fists and lethal sticks, and disconnecting electricity. The AIML supporters then had the incidents published in newspapers in order to send a false message to the masses that the public was anti-Mashriqi and anti-Khaksar Tehrik. On occasion, Mashriqi and the Khaksars were even physically attacked and injured by AIML hooligans. The League's disruptive activities were intended to intimidate supporters of the Khaksar Tehrik.

Other political opponents of the League were also victimized during the elections. Bengal Krishak Proja leader, Humayun Kabir, was assaulted and injured by supporters of the Muslim League. According to *The Tribune* of January 21, 1946, "The report states that the hooligans...dragged Mr. Kabir out of [the railway] compartment brutally assaulted him, inflicted serious injuries, stripped him of his clothes..." In yet another incident, *The Tribune* of January 23, 1946 reported that "a motor lorry carrying League workers armed with hatchets attacked the workers of Mr. Maulana Bux at Jagan polling station which is Mr. .Maulana Bux's stronghold. Some person's were injured one rather seriously."

Clearly, the Muslim League members were willing to go to any lengths to gain power for themselves, and were completely indifferent to the will of the masses. Meanwhile, the Government, which was partial to the League, took no action against the AIML. Perhaps Barrister Aftab Iqbal (son of Allama Iqbal) best summarized the attitude of the League in a letter to Jawahar Lal Nehru on July 23, 1946:

"...the Muslim masses...were grossly misled by the provincial henchmen of the League aristocracy...Unfortunately the men who form the League Working Committee and the League provincial bodies lack intellectual culture, patriotism, political farsightedness catholicity of outlook and sympathetic understanding of the problems, hopes and fears of millions of starving Muslims with whom they seldom come in personal contact. Their one principal aim is to capture power with the assistance of the ignorant Muslim peasant with whom they have nothing in common and whose economic welfare is, to them, a matter of indifference" (*The Tribune*, Lahore July 25, 1946).

Thus, the AIML, through manipulation of the masses and with Government backing, was able to win the 1946 elections and later their demand for the division of India. In 1947,

the British completed the transfer of power to the Muslim League. The AIML leadership credited itself with having brought independence and denied the role of any other party towards freedom.

So, it seems that from the very beginning, Pakistan's leadership stood on shaky moral ground. How then could the very same group - who had so egregiously violated all democratic principles to attain power - be expected to setup a genuine democracy in Pakistan?

Indeed, the abuse of power and democracy by the AIML leadership reached new heights following the creation of Pakistan. AIML leaders were projected as heroes, freedom fighters, and champions of the Muslim cause. Roads, educational institutions, and other important venues were named after them. However, no one was permitted to speak openly against the Two-Nation Theory. The AIML leadership had been raised to the status of saints and their follies could not be brought to the public knowledge. In other words, the right to free speech was no longer permissible.

The AIML also hit a new low with regards to its handling of political opponents: from character assassination to political victimization. According to author Ghulam Kibria, the undemocratic actions were evident within days of independence with Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah's "dismissal of the Frontier government...[which enjoyed] a clear majority in the provincial assembly" (*Dawn* September 4, 2005). Furthermore, the new Government rigorously manipulated the facts to create an erroneous image of nationalist leaders (who had opposed partition). A slew of propaganda was unleashed against leaders that had opposed the AIML regarding partition. Materials for these parties were not provided to libraries and research on them was not encouraged; even the educational curriculum was not to include them. In books, the Pakistan movement was distorted and only carried the Muslim League version. Most unfortunate is that those who actually suffered at the hands of the British to bring freedom were denigrated in the public eye. Even though their methodologies or philosophies may have differed from that of the AIML, their objective had still been the same: British India's freedom. Despite this, they were either declared to be traitors or anti-Pakistan. Allama Mashrafi was among the main victims of this policy and was repeatedly harassed and arrested by the Government. For instance, in order to prevent him from playing any role in the upcoming elections, the Punjab Government arrested Mashrafi on January 11, 1951 under the Punjab Public Safety Act (which stated that anyone could be kept under detention for an indefinite period) (*The Pakistan Times*, Lahore February 20, 1951).

The Government's actions brought resentment among the public. At a public meeting of the Islam League (founded by Mashrafi after the creation of Pakistan) in Lahore on January 12, 1951, the speakers condemned the Government:

“This meeting expresses its strong resentment against the arrest of Mr. Inayatulla Mashrafi, founder of the Islam League, and the candidates of the Islam League to the Provincial Assembly, and demands that they should be released immediately and unconditionally.”

Another resolution at the same meeting stated:

“This meeting regards the [Punjab] Public Safety Act as a great curse and demands its immediate repeal. The meeting feels that in the presence of the Safety Act it is not possible to work any democratic system whether of the Western type or of the Islamic pattern.” (*Pakistan Times* January 13, 1951).

Nothing came of these protests and resolution and Mashriqi remained behind bars for one and a half years (he was released on July 09, 1952). The point is that the Government was indifferent to the will of the people. They controlled the media and used propaganda to influence public opinion. By putting Mashriqi and the Islam League candidates behind bars, the Muslim League had guaranteed themselves victory in the Punjab elections. It is important to point out that the Government’s undemocratic behavior could not have been perpetrated without the consent of the top leaders, including Prime Minister Nawabzada Liaquat Ali Khan. Such actions by the founding fathers clearly had a devastating impact on the development of democracy in the country. Unfortunately, Governments subsequent to that of Nawabzada Liaquat Ali Khan followed their predecessors and continued the political victimization. In short, the AIML adopted methods that were highly objectionable, oppressive and undemocratic.

Concluding, it is now clear why Pakistan was unable to establish a stable democracy. The AIML was a party that had risen to power using unfair means and based on a policy of communalism; it had then committed even greater injustices to retain that power. Though the AIML claimed to represent the Muslims regardless of class or social position, in reality it was indifferent to their concerns; it was only using the public strength to serve itself. The leadership expected sacrifice from people, but did not provide anything in return. Given that the AIML itself was undemocratic, how could it possibly have setup a true democracy in the country?

The AIML’s actions undoubtedly sabotaged the democracy in Pakistan at its infancy. To put the country on a democratic path, the founding fathers should have led by example. The Government should have declared the judiciary to be completely independent and made education compulsory for everyone, so that the coming generations could effectively take part in the democratic process. If this had been done, the situation in Pakistan could have been much different from what we see today. Because of the mistakes made by its founding fathers, the country now finds itself in a most precarious state, and the current generations are paying for past mistakes. It is unfortunate to note, however, that the leaders in Pakistan today have not learned from the follies of their predecessors. They must act now to put an end to political victimization and create an environment that nurtures democracy. Otherwise, Pakistan will forever be plagued by foreign exploitation, terrorism and corruption, and the suffering of the masses.

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The author was one of the invitees at the "Contested Spaces, Competing Narratives: Towards Human Rights and Democracy in Pakistan" conference at Tufts & Harvard Universities on April 6 – 7, 2007. The above piece was circulated among the participants of the conference.