PAKISTAN: THE YEAR OF CHANGE

Ghazi Salahuddin

1968 was a year of great change for Pakistan. The country seemed uniquely plugged into the spirit of that time as it manifested itself in the West. As a young reporter in Karachi, I was a participant-observer of a social and political upheaval that became the seed of momentous events in Pakistan’s history.

Bangladeshi independence

In 1968, what is now Pakistan was West Pakistan. Separated by one thousand miles of India was East Pakistan, which is now Bangladesh. The beginning of the creation of this nation is one event that can be traced back to this decisive year. In the first week of January 1968, the central government accused Bengali leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman of conspiring with India to make East Pakistan a separate country. Sheikh Mujib was arrested, and East Pakistan was pushed into a protracted phase of political uncertainty marked by violent agitation. Following Bangladesh’s independence in 1971, however, Rahman, who was never convicted, was released and became the leader of the new nation.

Protest against propaganda

The issue of social and economic disparity in Pakistan society also came to the fore in this pivotal year. Ayub Khan, the military leader who had seized power in a coup in 1958, and his government inaugurated a propaganda campaign celebrating “the decade of development.” But this propaganda merely underlined the disparity between the classes as it grew ever more evident that the fruits of economic progress had not filtered down to the lower classes. One memorable slogan of the year was “22 families.” The Chief Economist of the Planning Commission, Dr. Mahbubul Haq, had revealed in a document that a mere 22 families owned or controlled 66 percent of the nation’s industrial wealth and 87 percent of banking and insurance wealth. Khan’s propaganda campaign thus greatly annoyed the majority of the people, prompting a strong backlash.

The national language, Urdu, was deployed in the popular movement, especially by the poets. One rebel poet, Habib Jalib, a Marxist-Leninist who tended toward communism and was not afraid to express his
views openly, won great acclaim for his readings at political meetings.
Jalib, of course, had a provocative take on “22 families.” The poetry of
socialist Faiz Ahmed Faiz, perhaps the greatest modern Urdu poet,
illustrated the major political events in a classical diction. This protest
poetry, in a way, was a Pakistani echo of the pop music that enthralled
the defiant youth of the West in 1968.

Year of the television

1968 was also the year of television in Pakistan, ushering in a cul-
tural explosion. Three television stations were set up in Karachi,
Lahore, and Rawalpindi in late 1967 and a fourth was inaugurated
in Dhaka, East Pakistan, in early 1968. Though television, like radio,
was state-controlled and the news was highly censored, the medium
conveyed its own message. Suddenly, a largely illiterate population
was exposed to living images from the far corners of the world. It was
assumed that Ayub Khan wanted to use television to promote his own
agenda, but like “the decade of development,” its actual effect ran
counter to its intent. Social critics noted how television, irrespective
of its content, stimulated popular discontent. Shows made in Hol-
lywood projected a world of unbelievable opulence and convenience
that exacerbated the sense of deprivation among the populace. The
rage that played out on the streets may have had its roots in the forbidden glitter
of lives lived in the West.

Bhutto founds the Pakistan People’s Party

Most significantly, 1968 was the year in
which charismatic leader Zulfikar Ali
Bhutto (1928–1979) developed a large fol-
lowing. He mobilized the youth to chal-
lenge the status quo and awakened deep
yearnings for social emancipation among
the masses. Bhutto’s name still functions
as a red flag in Pakistan politics, with
many describing him as the prince of the
country’s political disorders.

In 1958, Bhutto became the youngest min-
ister in Ayub Khan’s cabinet. However,
Bhutto resigned in late 1966, gradually
emerging as the main figure opposing
Khan’s government. On November 30, 1967, he formed the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) with a revolutionary, socialist manifesto. The PPP constituted an alliance of the progressive intelligentsia and the oppressed masses. With the slogan “All power belongs to the masses,” Bhutto provided the people with a sense of agency.

Through his vocal opposition, Bhutto emerged as a cult leader for the youth and decisively changed Pakistan. It was only natural that he would be a polarizing figure. Just as his followers revered him deeply, the ruling establishment saw him as the incarnation of evil. And like most charismatic leaders who emerge in times of crisis, he radicalized public opinion in an aggressive manner. He was intellectually brilliant and often subtly calculating in his politics. The first leader to cover the entire length and breadth of (West) Pakistan, Bhutto had phenomenal energy, holding a dozen or more speeches a day. Throughout this year, Bhutto found himself in and out of jail.

In rural areas, with ordinary people responding to his call, the entire political landscape was transformed. I remember running into the streets of Karachi watching the police disperse rallies staged by students, lawyers, or trade unions, with baton charges and tear gas. There was a lot of stone-throwing, as well.

This agitation culminated in the catalytic event of November 7, 1968, when police opened fire on students gathered to greet Bhutto in Rawalpindi. One student was killed. Demonstrations erupted in all the cities of the country, and there were many violent confrontations. In Rawalpindi, the army had to be called in and a curfew imposed. At this point, factory workers joined in the students’ protest. Bhutto and other leaders were arrested.

But people’s dissatisfaction could not be ignored. Not long after the year ended, in March 1969, there was another military intervention; Ayub Khan handed power over to his military chief, General Agha Mohammed Yahya Khan; martial law was imposed with the promise that democracy would be restored.

When East Pakistan won independence with the help of the Indian army in late 1971, Bhutto became prime minister of Pakistan, and, although the history of these recent decades is quite complex and Bhutto was eventually executed by military ruler Zia-ul-Haq in 1979, the Bhutto phenomenon and the Pakistan People’s Party has survived to this day. In 1973, Bhutto’s title changed to president under
a new constitution. Then, in 1977, he was ousted from power by a military coup following allegations that the election was rigged in favor of Bhutto’s PPP. His 1979 execution was a traumatic event in the country’s history. But in spite of repeated attempts by the “establishment” to crush the PPP, Bhutto’s daughter Benazir inherited his charisma and became the head of government twice—in 1988 until she was removed in 1990, and in 1993 until she was removed in 1996. After eight years of exile in London, she returned to Pakistan in 2007 and warned of mass protests as the leading candidate of the opposition. Though she was assassinated during an election rally in Rawalpindi on December 27, 2007, the PPP went on to win numerous seats in the general elections the following February, so that the Pakistani president, Nawaz Sharif, signed an agreement to form a coalition government between his Pakistan Muslim League party and the PPP. In this way, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto’s spirit lives on.

In sum, 1968 was a watershed year for Pakistan. The country’s youth became angry and restless. And in the midst of all that tumult, they were excited and hopeful about the future. They could see the rainbow in the sky. I know because I was one of them.

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