

THE INCORRIGIBLE ZULFIKAR ALI BHUTTO

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The misdemeanors of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto of Pakistan are legendary. Tomes have already been written about this 'dark, diabolical prince' of Larkana, Sind, in Pakistan. A comprehensive account of his life has been vividly captured in the book titled, 'Zulfi Bhutto of Pakistan: His Life and Times', by the renowned American academic, historian and writer on South Asia, Stanley Wolpert. A more exhaustive, meticulously researched, with incisive insight into the Bhutto era, including threadbare analysis of his personality traits, politics, policies and legacy has been brilliantly put together by Salman Taseer, who personally knew him well. This preeminently readable book is entitled, 'Bhutto: A Political Biography'.

As a schoolboy in the late 1960s, I was once quite taken by Bhutto's flamboyance and articulation. After all, did he not speak the Queen's English very well? As a pseudo-anglicized youth, I was rather impressed by him. I remember learning two English words from his speech made at the Lahore High Court in his own defense in 1967-'68. These were 'obduracy' and 'conflagration'. Our English teacher in school, Mr. G. A. Leaver, a no-nonsense Englishman with a stiff upper lip wasn't amused at all, when I had used these words unwittingly in an essay to impress him. He circled the words boldly in red ink, besides fixing me with a baleful stare. I got the message loud and clear.

I have seen Bhutto only once and that too, in close proximity in 1970. It happened quite by an accident. In mid-1970, the political climate in Pakistan was 'heating up' with



Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, walking out of the Security Council on December 15, 1971, after a failed attempt to pass a resolution calling for Indian troop withdrawal from East Pakistan.



Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1928-1979)

various political parties on the campaign trail canvassing for votes. They were getting ready to contest the upcoming national elections set for December, 1970. The two major parties in the fray were Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib's Awami League in the then East Pakistan and Bhutto's People's Party in West Pakistan. On a fine morning, I and a few friends planned a short visit to Murree from Islamabad and, took off on our excursion in an old Volkswagen car. However, barely half way to Murree we got stalled. There was a traffic jam. Soon people were abandoning their vehicles and running ahead. We were certain that something terrible had happened, perhaps a car wreck. But then some young passersby started to shout "Jije Bhutto!" "Bhutto Zindabad!". We soon came to know that Bhutto, too, was going to Murree on his campaign trail and, thus the resultant gridlock on the narrow winding road. He had a scheduled meeting there. We parked our car and walked ahead amidst the ensuing commotion. We saw Bhutto and his party men sitting in a jeep, while a truckload of his student supporters maintained a vigil from behind. Some of these youth were engaged in an altercation with the passengers of a public bus who were clamoring for Bhutto to emerge from the jeep and say a few words. We were afraid that a scuffle might break out between Bhutto's young emotional supporters, who were being delayed by the insistent public. Therefore, we maintained a safe distance and watched the situation.

We could clearly recognize some Gordon College (in Rawalpindi) students in Bhutto's entourage. A few were immaculately attired in their Sunday best in double-breasted jackets and sporting, 'a la Waheed Murad hairstyle'. To resolve the stand-off, Bhutto wearing a suit and tie soon emerged from the jeep and was hailed up on the truck to say a few words. By now there was a sizable crowd who had left their vehicles stranded on the narrow road to watch the unfolding spectacle. The road to Murree was completely choked. A student supporter of Bhutto told everyone to calm down. With a portable bullhorn Bhutto started a speech in English and Urdu. It was all about his party's manifesto and promises to the nation. He urged everyone to vote for his party the PPP, in the upcoming national elections in December. He went on for quite a while interspersed by slogans from the crowd. Suddenly, our friend Yazdani said to us in an agitated tone, "Arey, tu log yea Hindu naachne-wali beta ka masti kuon dekh raho? Chal garh wapis chal." ("Why are you guys watching the antics of the son of a Hindu baijee/dancing girl? Let's go home).

Yazdani a Punjabi, was an army brat. His father was a retired army officer. He could not stand Bhutto, while our other friend Sulaiman also a Punjabi, was an ardent supporter of Bhutto and his political party. A heated exchange ensued between the two, leading almost to a fistfight. We intervened just in time. It is not for the first time though, that I had heard of Bhutto's 'controversial' mother in those days. However, the fact remains that Bhutto's mother although born a Hindu, before her marriage to Sir Shahnawaz Bhutto, was not a 'baijee' or dancing girl. This was deliberately concocted by Bhutto's adversaries to belittle him and discredit him politically in the eyes of the 'faithful'. Besides, Bhutto's mother had converted to Islam on her marriage to his father, Sir Shahnawaz, and subsequently became a pious Muslim. However, she was never fully accepted within the powerful Bhutto clan, and looked upon with suspicion and disdain.

In the meantime on the road to Murree, Bhutto was into his elements. As he spoke, he gesticulated wildly castigating his political foes and made faces at some. He was good at mimicry. It was interesting to watch his moves. His tone was high pitched and shrill. I

ing that he was ill. With a sheepish grin he said in Punjabi and a smattering of Urdu, "hum Bhutto saab ki PIP's party mein hoon" (I belong to Bhutto's Peoples Party, PPP). He was sitting on his haunches while swabbing the floor. He went on to say in a sonorous voice that Bhutto had promised the ghareeb (poor) and mazdoor (workers) of the nation with, "roti, kapra aur makkhan!" (bread, clothing and butter) if voted to power. I laughed aloud and corrected him by saying, "Arey bewakuf, makkhan nahin, makan!" (hey stupid, it's not butter but a house!). Suddenly, an otherwise shy and submissive Masih stood up rag in hand, eye-balled me and said audaciously, "tera ye makan ek din hamara hoga" (one day this house of yours will be mine). I was young and became speechless with shock and anger. I exploded and told him, "Abhey, geedar ke bacche tussi foren ye kamre se nikal toh sahi" (why you son of a jackal, you get out of this room immediately). Murmuring with down cast eyes he obliged and left the room. I recall being upset for days from this unexpected incident. In hindsight, this pseudo-socialist, populist image assiduously cultivated by Bhutto in a well entrenched feudal society will perhaps remain his abiding legacy

for staging a coup against him, and upbraid him publicly. He could still draw record crowds at rallies with his popularity and charisma. It alarmed Zia. Thus, Zia realized that it would be risky to hold an election, he had earlier hinted at. If Bhutto ever won it, then his neck would be on the line! So, he had Bhutto rearrested again. Meanwhile, Zia tactfully released Yahya conditionally from house arrest, with a request to him to implicate Bhutto as the main culprit responsible for precipitating the political crisis, leading to the army action in March 1971, in East Pakistan. Yahya meekly complied. That was exactly what Zia wanted and as a special gesture, allowed Yahya to proceed to USA for treatment of his heart ailment. With Yahya's tacit confession of Bhutto's full complicity in 1971, his fate was further sealed. Moreover, a western journalist has written a very telling book, where he clearly mentions that the Americans too, wanted a non compliant and unmanageable Bhutto out of the way. They were very upset with him when he clandestinely acquired nuclear capability.

Actually, the impetuous Bhutto had been causing annoyance to the Americans for a quite awhile. Early on, as Ayub's powerful foreign minister his initial coziness with the Soviets and later on with the Chinese, did not sit well with the American oligarchy. And, after he became the all powerful Prime Minister of Pakistan in 1971, following the military debacle and creation of Bangladesh, he had again rubbed the Americans the wrong way by secretly embarking upon a nuclear program, thereby encouraging nuclear proliferation in the developing world. Besides, Bhutto had also irked Kissinger by rejecting an important proposal placed by the American Secretary of State. So, when the 'high and mighty' of the world literally implored Zia-ul-Haq to commute Bhutto's death sentence, Zia remained steadfast in his resolve. As mentioned above, a noted Western journalist and writer has succinctly pointed out in his book that it was actually the Americans who had advised Zia not to pardon Bhutto, thereby politely ignore requests for clemency of world leaders. It suited Zia very well for his own survival. He, therefore, went ahead with Bhutto's execution.

The Americans came to consider Bhutto as a mercurial, unreliable and a difficult man to tame or trust. Therefore, they wanted him out of the way as much as did Zia. In the end, the sordid task to end Bhutto's life ultimately fell upon a poor fourth generation professional executioner, a wretched drug addict with a remorseless countenance named Tara Masih, whose forefathers had allegedly started on the macabre trade since the heydays of the Sikh Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the 'one-eyed Lion' of the Punjab. So, Tara Masih walked into history by becoming the hangman of Bhutto, arguably the most famous politician of Pakistan after Jinnah, and also one of the most popular third world leaders of his time, who had tried unsuccessfully to construct an alternate post-colonial order, comprising of some of the former colonial Islamic and African states of the third world, thereby, delicately balancing the influence of the then two superpowers, the Soviet Union and the US.

Bhutto was also keen on revising certain aspects of the pro-Western foreign policy of Pakistan, by charting a more balanced or independent course from the ones laid down by his predecessors: Jinnah, Iskander Mirza, Ayub, Mohammad Ali Bogra and even Suhrawardy (as Prime Minister), not to mention the Pakistani military. However, Bhutto conveniently forgot the promise made by the improbable founder of Pakistan, M A Jinnah, to the Anglo-Americans who ultimately made Pakistan possible, due to its unique geostrategic location during the cold war. A naive Jinnah had confided to the notable American Journalist, Margaret Bourke-White, soon after the partition in 1947,

with his pompous declaration that, "America needs Pakistan more than Pakistan needs America." Who was Jinnah trying to impress? Just imagine this hyperbole coming from the head of state of a newly emergent, dirt poor truncated country with dry coffers? Pakistan in its 'infancy', was literally run for a while by the largesse of the Nawab of Bahawalpur and the old Nizam of Hyderabad, who dispatched regular plane flights of monies to sustain its economy and keep the country afloat. However, soon enough Pakistan became wholly dependent and mired in Western economic and military aid, in particular from the US. Could the founder of Pakistan really comprehend what he had recklessly committed himself to, by literally becoming a 'client state' of the Western powers, and the negative consequences such a partnership entailed?

The truth is, although Jinnah was a brilliant constitutional lawyer, razor-sharp and intelligent, he was by no means an intellectual or someone well versed in statecraft or world affairs. He had never bothered to read anything beyond law books, let alone on history or global politics. He thought "reading books affected one's original thinking." Consequently, he never developed to be a visionary, a latitudinarian or a thoroughbred politician in the true sense of the word. Obduracy, exceptional arrogance and a pronounced dictatorial propensity were the prominent hallmarks of his character, besides being strangely a latter day 'Victorian prude' of sorts, with all its underlying inhibitions and quirks. He was also someone with very poor inter-personal skills, being unswervingly single minded and headstrong. And, with advancing age he exhibited more expressively an innate impatience, a congenial self-righteousness and a combative, egocentric personality. It set into motion a trend and style in Pakistani national politics from its very inception, which was avowedly an unenlightened one, espousing a reactionary, pro-western, rightist and an undemocratic presidential form of government with a strong center, along with an obsessive preoccupation and jingoistic posturing governed by a 'paranoid perception of an Indian threat', which has been emulated to date by all subsequent political heirs of Jinnah, albeit more for the convenience of power and populism, but ultimately with disastrous consequences for Pakistan, resulting in the infamous debacle and shameful defeat in 1971, and the emergence of Bangladesh.

I was in the US when Bhutto was hanged in 1979, and clearly recall how extensively the international media, especially the print media covered his sorry demise. The leading American newspapers, in particular the British dailies for days on end, literally ran full pages on the life and times of Bhutto. It initially surprised me, that he received so much coverage and even adulation from some well known western journalists, who were once charmed by the man's sharp intellect and learned overview on world affairs. However, in the final analysis, Bhutto's ingrained feudal background and Machiavellian mindset became his nemesis. He conveniently forgot that one cannot forever hope to outwit others, let alone one's own fate! As a Bangladeshi, I strongly feel inclined to say, however primordial it may seem, that in the end Bhutto richly deserved every inch of the hangman's noose for his criminal complicity with the Pakistani military junta, leading to the brutal genocide in the then East Pakistan in 1971. He was evil personified!

Postscript: My comments on Bhutto's depravity, is more eloquently complemented by a telling appraisal of the man by an erudite gentleman, Sir James Morris, the then British High Commissioner to Pakistan, who otherwise got on very well with Bhutto, the foreign minister of Pakistan under President Ayub Khan. As an astute observer, Sir James, made an uncanny prediction of the man's future. Having observed Bhutto closely, he garnered a rather dark view of him which he entered in a confidential report sent to London in 1965. Later in his memoirs, 'Pakistan Chronicle', he put it bluntly, "Bhutto certainly had the right qualities for reaching the heights - drive, charm, imagination, a quick and penetrating mind, a sense of humour, and a thick skin. Such a blend is rare anywhere, and Bhutto deserved his swift rise to power... But there was - how shall I put it? - a rank odour of hellfire about him. It was a case of corruptio optima pessima. He was a Lucifer, a flawed angel. I believe at heart he lacked a sense of the dignity and value of other people; his own self was what counted. I sensed in him a ruthlessness and capacity for ill-doing which was far beyond what is natural. Except at university abroad, he was mostly surrounded by mediocrities, and all his life, for want of competition, his triumphs came too easily for his own good. Lacking humility he thus came to believe himself infallible, even when yawning gaps in his own experience (e.g. of military matters) laid him - as over the 1965 war - wide open to disastrous error. Despite his gifts, I judged that one day Bhutto would destroy himself - when I could not tell. In 1965, I so reported in one of my last despatches from Pakistan as British High Commissioner. I wrote by way of clinching the point that Bhutto was born to be hanged. I did not intend this comment as precise prophecy of what was going to happen to him, but fourteen years later that was what it turned out to be."

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Dawn, April 5, 1979

observed him with a lot of interest. His profile silhouetted against an overcast sky showed a middle aged man with a slight paunch, an emerging double chin, a drooping lower lip and a prominent forehead with a receding hairline. His facial profile looked deceptively somewhat betwixt a Pierre Trudeau of Canada and Prince Karim Aga Khan, although Bhutto was of a dusky complexion compared to them. There was also an effeminate grace about him suggestive of emotional immaturity. He was known to rant, weep, use profane language liberally and throw tantrums when things did not go his way. Towards the end of his speech, with a sudden histrionic flourish he opened his jacket and pretended to throw it to the crowd. Dozens of expectant hands went up in eager anticipation. It was clear that he enjoyed theatrics. As Bhutto was helped down from the truck a milling crowd of admirers surrounded him. We thought we had, had enough and abandoned our plan of an excursion to Murree, and headed back to Islamabad somewhat crestfallen.

As we were walking towards our parked car, I was suddenly rooted to the spot. I spied our house-cleaner Aftab Masih, a short, dark, scrawny, spindly-legged Punjabi Christian in the crowd all excited, frothing in the mouth (drunk or doped) rendering full throated pro-Bhutto slogans. He was prancing and clapping in a group. As soon as he saw me he melted away. Next morning, he showed up late for work at our house. I charged him for absenting and ly-

ing in the political culture of Pakistan. Nobody else before him had ever spoken to the poor people in the then West Pakistan like him. How much of it he really meant, and how much of it was for self-aggrandizement or cheap popularity, is best left for posterity to judge?

Bhutto's rise to power and prominence was as meteoric as was his downfall. In the end his former 'monkey general' turned military President, Zia-ul-Haq, would hang him in 1979, in a controversial court judgment for an alleged murder charge. "I shall hang the blither" Zia had said, while Bhutto was still languishing in jail. Initially, Zia's coup in 1977, looked curiously like an apologetic one. I was in the US when it happened. The leading American newspapers were regularly reporting on Pakistan, sometimes with photographs of Bhutto and Zia together. One such photo showed Zia visiting Bhutto in Murree, where he was kept comfortably under house arrest. It showed Zia in army uniform seated somewhat in an obsequious manner across from a scowling Bhutto, who appeared to be visibly upset. In the beginning Zia allowed a regular supply of newspapers, magazines, books and even the choicest of hard drinks for Bhutto. However, Bhutto's arrogance and diatribes against Zia in his presence gradually convinced him that if a vindictive Bhutto ever managed to get free through legal means then he (Zia) would be in deep trouble. He, therefore, hardening his stance. Still out of power and on bail, a belligerent Bhutto had the temerity to threaten Zia with dire consequences