

# Thus spoke Suhrawardy

On the occasion of the 133rd birth anniversary of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, The Daily Star is publishing an excerpt from one of his most notable writings, "Political Stability and Democracy in Pakistan." The article first appeared in the internationally renowned journal Foreign Affairs (Vol. 35, No. 3, April 1957), during Suhrawardy's tenure as Prime Minister of Pakistan.

Because the need for political stability is central to all the major questions faced by my country, I should like to concentrate on an analysis of this problem, suggesting the spirit and attitude with which it must be met rather than articulating a specific policy. [...] To set our problems in perspective, it is well to begin with some of the characteristics of the past from which Pakistan emerged as a state.

For many centuries before partition and independence in 1947 the type of government experienced by the peoples of the subcontinent of Asia was imposed by right of conquest; it lacked the ingredient of consent. British rule – let me acknowledge parenthetically our indebtedness to the British for lessons they taught us in administrative integrity, constitutional procedure and proprieties – was only a final phase of a long record of this character. Whether the seat of power was in London or in a local capital was of secondary importance. Either way, the traditions, usages and premises of self-government were lacking.

In such a situation administration and popular aspiration turn on each other as counter forces. Those governing almost inevitably regard their power as something to be exercised despite the will of the governed. The governed regard government as something set against their own interests and purposes. In this situation government has authority only in a narrow sense of being able to compel compliance but not in the deeper moral meaning of having the faculty to elicit consent, to lead and to bind in conscience. In such a situation, law exists in the sense in which we speak of laying down the law – a morally neutral meaning applicable to what administrators ordain and magistrates effect in the manifold daily undertakings of the state; but it does not exist in the sense in which we speak of the rule of law – a phrase invoking a concept of administrators amenable to a set of purposes and restrained by limits established by the consent and will of those subject to their authority.

When law in the technical sense of what is enforced is divorced from law in its moral sense implicit in the rule of law, the operators of the mechanism of government tend inevitably to think of themselves as in possession and to regard scornfully and fear fully as trespassers those who attempt to call up and to marshal popular political aspirations. By the same token, those approaching politics simply in terms of kindling popular aspiration tend to miss a disciplined consciousness of the limits of government. They think of it more as an exercise in rhetoric, theory and ideals than as a stern business of keeping promises.

The inherent weakness of colonial government lies in the alienation between administration and popular aspiration. Administration carried on without a sense of accountability to popular aspirations is deprived of imagination: at best it tends to be sterile; at worst it becomes oppressive. The evocation of general political aspirations without regard

for actual operating requirements and limits of government results too often in producing giddiness and demagoguery. Political communication is deprived of realism, and the result is likely to be the politics of agitation and utopia. The whole truth and essence of sound government require a continual dialogue between actuality and aspiration, between administrative authority and political leadership – a dialogue that can take place only when each side understands the other and feels kinship rather than distrust.

A people coming into independence from a colonial past faces a task of correcting this alienation between the two. The operative and the evocative aspects of the state must be brought into working relationship. New habits of mind have to be substituted for old. Administration must unlearn its scorn of politics. Politics must overcome its hostility to administration. Only in this way can a government and the people governed communicate confidence to each other and learn that they can count on each other.

Estrangement between the governing and the governed; anxiety on the part of those in authority over their warrant and their tenure; sterility of government resulting from a lack of confidence among those in authority as to their ability to tap the creative forces of public trust; vanity, opportunism and emotional extravagance characterizing mass leaders who have never tasted responsibility; cold feet and hot heads – such are the conditions of instability in government. These have persisted among us in Pakistan in the degree that we have failed to resolve our wills to throw off habits of a departed past, have permitted moral independence to lag behind legal independence, and have kept political leadership and governmental responsibility as things opposed to each other rather than bringing them into synthesis.

In giving a diagnosis I have indicated a remedy. Fortunately this remedy lies completely within our resources without necessity of any aid from abroad. We Pakistanis have no choice as to how to go about creating an effective basis for our

state. No royal or aristocratic pattern of duty and authority based on long and universal acceptance is at hand to serve our needs. The goal can be achieved only through elections. Warning voices sometimes tell me that Pakistan is not ready for the democratic process. I can only reply that then Pakistan is not ready at all; for there is no alternative way of bringing about rapport between authority and people, no other avenue to national fulfillment.

I have sometimes heard arguments for an opposite course to national consolidation, a course involving abandonment of the idea of franchise, discarding of principles of accountability and resorting to authority based not upon a warrant to rule but upon the power to rule – in brief, dictatorship. [...]

Whenever I ask an advocate of this expedient to give a bill of particular ills of our political society requiring remedy, I get some such list as this: corruption, shortage of talent in government, insufficiency of bonds of identity between authority and people, deficiency of public education and information, the dominance of emotion rather than reason in political life, and the centrifugal influence of provincialism.

I do not deny the existence of these ills. My answer is simply that the purported remedy represents not a cure but avoidance of a cure. We have only to look to the lands that have dictatorship to gain some insight into how it would work. Dictatorship would not combat corruption; it would erect corruption into a principle. Dictatorship would not widen the access to talent in the public service; it would close sources of talent by preempting office for a chosen inner group and alienating the rest. Instead of durable identity between government and people derived from the operation of consent, dictatorship could employ only the brittle bonds of coercion. Its instrument would not be information but deception and concealment, and it would seek not the education but the confusion and the continued tutelage of the people by playing on their emotions rather than permitting the operation of reason. [...]

In any event, whatever our weaknesses of the past, they certainly have not been attributable to overdoses of democracy, for we have yet to try a full dosage. Upon being

called to the Prime Ministership I made clear my own outlook in these words, which I now reaffirm: "The first essential is to secure political stability, and that can never be attained unless we allow free play to democratic processes... I realize that democracy has its weaknesses, for democracy is human; it has its inevitable failings, but on the whole it is the only sure road to progress and evolution. . . . Politics and politicians too have been maligned unthinkingly by those who fail to realize that politics is essential for the cohesion of the state and that the politicians are its servants. Politics is the grand avenue of service to humanity...". I pledged that there would be no loss of time in making preparations for a general election, and I added: "I think I can lay claim to at least this much of trust, that the election will be fair and free, so long as I have anything to do with it." [...]

Those who find the prospect of democracy in Pakistan too chancy and fearsome point especially to the factors of political apathy, the meagerness of economic life and the prevalence of illiteracy among large portions of our population. They are apprehensive that the people will vote emotions and unfulfillable wants rather than bringing their politics down – or should I say up? – to the level of rational choice among practical alternatives.

I do not share these apprehensions. I am thoroughly familiar with the political consciousness of the people of East Pakistan. I should be the last to deny their aptitude for seasoning the meat of politics with the spice of enthusiasm. Yet I have seen them many times gather by tens of thousands to give apt attention to a realistic discussion of policy. A more politically conscious people does not exist anywhere.

The potential for a similar political consciousness exists in the western province. In September of 1956, soon after becoming Prime Minister, I spent ten heartening days in travel through the northern part of West Pakistan. I spoke time after time to audiences of tribesmen from the sparse hills, to farmers of the rich valleys, to urban throngs of artisans and tradesmen. I heard their questions. These questions preponderantly did not reflect dreams of utopia and did not spring from communal animosity. They were mostly about the real substance of politics – prices for crops, allocation of resources, the need for better housing and the like. [...]

I explained to them also – and with emphasis – the need for government to have authority so as to be able to bring expertise to bear in its decisions and to weigh the general interest without being subjected to the pressures, passions and prejudices rife in the marketplace. In the faces before me I saw comprehension and concurrence. I was refortified in my assurance that popular confidence and rational consent are not beyond expectation but are indeed the great unexploited resource still available to strengthen the nation. [...]

The full article is available on [The Daily Star website](#).



Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, Chief Minister of Bengal, at home in Calcutta with his dog, September 1946.  
Photo: Margaret Bourke-White, LIFE © Time Inc.



Prime Minister of Pakistan Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy is greeted by U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower at the White House, July 10, 1957.  
Photo: Thomas J. O'Halloran, Library of Congress

## A statesman of democracy



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### DR KAMAL HOSSAIN

I first came to know Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy in the formative years of my education and legal career. Mr Suhrawardy was a mentor, a role model, and an inspiration, both as a lawyer and a politician.

As I began my own legal career, I remember meeting Mr Suhrawardy in 1959 when he visited Dhaka and was appearing in court in political cases for persons who were being victimised by martial law authorities on all kinds of criminal charges.

I believe that there should be more research and writing on Mr Suhrawardy's life and contribution. In the meantime, I would like to share some of my recollections that I had earlier documented.

In the pre-partition period, Mr Suhrawardy's role in combating

communalism in politics was particularly significant. His own moving tribute to C. R. Das in his memoirs is a testimony to this: "Deshbandhu C. R. Das ... was endowed with a wide vision, he was totally non-communal. I believe with many that had he lived, he would have been able to guide the destiny of India along channels that would have eliminated the causes of conflict and bitterness which had bedevilled the relationship between Hindus and Muslims, and which for want of a just solution, led to the partition of India, and the creation of Pakistan." [...]

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receiving interests in land and for the redistribution of cultivable land to the tillers. Suhrawardy stood in the middle of the road.

Even before Pakistan formally

came into existence, the non-Bengalis who dominated the Muslim League leadership set about reinforcing and continuing their dominance. They engineered to replace Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, an effective leader with a popular base who had led this party to electoral victory in Bengal, with Khwaja Nazimuddin, who was too weak to threaten or challenge them. [...]

In the post-partition period, within Pakistan, as democratic forces opposing the communal politics of the Muslim League were gaining ground, the central government relied on communal politics to create divisions in East Bengal. It kept deferring the holding of general elections as the powerful interests at the Centre were apprehensive of the outcome. It is noteworthy that Suhrawardy and other political leaders, whose United Front had achieved electoral success in East Bengal in 1954, felt confident that a similar success could be achieved in the next general elections. Under continuing pressure, a general election had been promised in early 1959. This, however, was prevented by the abrogation of the

Constitution and a proclamation of martial law in October 1958. The commander-in-chief of the army, General Ayub Khan, who had been actively involved in protecting the interests of the ruling group since the early fifties, now came out into the open. With the abrogation of the 1956 Constitution, even the forms of a federal system were brushed aside. Direct administration by military governors was established. [...]

The first demand for people's participation in the political process was made, in this context, in June 1962 when nine leaders of East Pakistan issued a joint statement calling for the restoration of parliamentary democracy. Their attempt to put up a combined opposition to Ayub Khan's authoritarian rule resulted in the formation of the National Democratic Front (NDF) in October. But even before that, the students in the eastern wing had taken to the streets to register their protest against the policies pursued by the regime. The immediate cause was provided by the arrest of H. S. Suhrawardy. Soon after he was released, the students organised a widespread movement to register

their rejection of the new education policy introduced by Ayub Khan. The movement was ruthlessly suppressed and several students were killed in the police firing. The challenge it threw down to the regime did not lose significance. [...]

I hope that my recollections of the pivotal role that Mr Suhrawardy played at critical junctures of our history, and in shaping the forces in favour of establishing people's participation in politics, democratic practices, and a firm commitment to anti-communal politics, will catalyse others to study the history that led to our independence, and to reflect on the lessons for us as we continue our struggles to establish democracy and grapple with the challenges of building an inclusive society that respects the right of each person to their own identity and political belief.

This article draws on extracts from Kamal Hossain's memoir *Quest for Freedom and Justice* (University Press Limited, 2013); acknowledgements to Md Shah Jahan for his assistance.