

Centre-Punjab Relations in Islamic Republic of Pakistan During Benazir Bhutto's First Government (1988-1990)



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Abstract

Relations between the Centre and the Units always play pivotal role in the smooth functioning of the government in any federation. Cordiality of this relationship becomes most important where there is marked numerical difference in the population of the federating units. In case of Pakistan this reality has proved even more important as one of the federating units i.e., Punjab carries numerical majority than rest of the three federating units together. Being the most populous province of Pakistan, its support is not only a key for the success of any government in the centre but is also vital for the smooth functioning of the federal structure of the country. However, in spite of this, the relationship between the centre and the Punjab remained far from exemplary since inception of the state. For instance during the early fifties the Daultana government in Punjab encouraged anti-Ahmadi rites to create problems for the federal government of Nazimuddin. Contrary to this during the tenure of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Zia ul Haq, the Punjab government was nothing to do but to act upon the instructions of the central government. Conversely, when Benazir, the first woman prime minister of Muslim world came into power in 1988 differences deepened and the relations between the federal government and the Punjab remained highly tense. During this period both the governments did not make any serious efforts to improve their relations. Benazir's failure to develop smooth relations with the Punjab government was one of the major causes of her government's premature dismissal. The present paper is an effort to understand the Centre- Punjab relationship during the first tenure of Benazir's government and to dig out the multifarious causes and factors which were responsible for the alienation between the two governments and ultimate end of Benazir's Government in 1990.

Key Words: Islamic, Federation, Centre-Province relations, Benazir, Punjab, Pakistan

Background:

Born on 21 May 1953, Benazir Bhutto was a courageous leader, an eloquent orator, an accomplished writer, who was twice elected the prime minister of the country. According to Benazir, she did not want to enter into politics but the abrupt dismissal of

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her father's government on 5 July 1977 as a result of military coup of General Zia ul Haq (1924-1988) and latter his assassination forced Benazir to plunge into the thorny field of politics.¹ Since day first her politics was of reactionary sentiments based on avenging Zia who had toppled the government of her father and got him executed through judiciary.² Due to her politics of resistance during the eleven years of military regime she passed five years either in prison or in solitary confinement.³

The sudden death of Zia on 17th August 1988, along with the high brass of army, completely changed the political landscape of the country.⁴ The new appointed army chief, Mirza Aslam Baig (b: 1933) refused to impose martial and announced to hold the elections which were already scheduled during the life time of Zia.⁵ Although all the political parties were allowed to contest the elections yet the army did not want Benazir to come into power. Benazir's strong criticism on Zia and the high echelon of the army over the past decade was enough proof for army to declare Benazir as anti-army and anti-state. There were strong feelings among the inner circles of army that if Benazir came into power she would take revenge of her father from the institution.⁶ Resultantly the generals began to cobble the rival political forces of the PPP and forged an alliance of nine political parties with the name of *Islami Jamhoori Itehad* or Islamic Democratic Alliance (IJI).⁷ General Hameed Gul (1936-2015), the then Director General Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and Mirza Aslam Baig the then army chief played key role in the formation of the IJI.⁸ The IJI tarnished the victory of the PPP yet it failed to stop PPP to come into power. PPP emerged as the single largest party as a result of these elections and bagged ninety three (93) seats in the National Assembly compared to IJI which secured only fifty four (54) seats.⁹ The establishment had no other option but to accept Benazir as the prime minister of the country.¹⁰ However, the IJI had secured enough seats in the Punjab to form government there.¹¹ It is alleged by the PPP that the establishment wanted to create hurdles for Benazir therefore; it installed an anti-PPP government.¹² The PPP leadership blemished Nawaz Sharif (b:1949), the Chief Minister of Punjab for spending a large sum of money to purchase the vote of independent members and virtually kept them in confinement in Changa Manga Rest House near Lahore till the day of meeting of the Punjab Assembly for the election of Chief Minister.¹³ It is worth mentioning that the PPP had obtained more seats in the National Assembly's elections which were held three days earlier than the provincial elections.¹⁴ This was the background which is helpful to understand the shattering relations between the Centre and the Punjab since the very first day of Benazir's government.

Centre- Provinces Relationship under the Islamic States:

The centre province relations under the Muslim governments were not always exemplary. During the reign of first two pious caliphs (r:632-644) the centre was very powerful, and the provincial's administration were responsible to the centre. The caliph had the power to remove the governor upon his own discretion. But during the era of Uthman (R.A), the third caliph, the governors of the provinces became so powerful that they began to challenge the authority of the caliph. After the assassination of Uthman (R.A), Ali (R.A) was appointed the caliph but his authority was challenged by Muawiya, the Governor of Syria who refused to subdue before the centre and wage a war against the caliph. This was the beginning of the centre- province conflict in Islamic world. Since then, on many occasions, the strong differences between the centre and the Provinces were erupted during the long span of Muslim history. In this way the worse centre-

provinces relations in Islamic Republic of Pakistan is not a new phenomenon in the Muslim world.

However, one thing which Pakistan has different from the earlier Islamic states is procedure for the collection of revenues. In earlier Islamic states, the province had dominated power over the collection and spending of revenues. They were only obliged to dispatch surplus money to the centre. But in Islamic republic of Pakistan the central government has the power of imposition and collection of all the key taxes. The central government provide the provinces share in the collected revenue. One of the major complaints which the provinces had against the centre is that it did not provide them their due share in the pool of collected money. On many occasions the provinces turned against the centre over the issue of finance. Over the past three score and twelve-year history of Pakistan, the provinces had demonstrated their grievances over the distribution of resources. The East Pakistan which consisted of the 54% population of the country had seceded over the issue of the distribution of resources.

Centre –Punjab Relations:

Since the beginning of her government, Benazir Bhutto was unsuccessful to develop exemplary working relationship with the Punjab government.¹⁵ It happened for the first time till the then electoral history of Pakistan that a party assumed power in the Centre but had failed to govern in the Punjab. Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif was elected Chief Minister of the Punjab with the support of IJI and independent members.¹⁶ Nawaz a businessman turned politician is supposed to be the by-product of army. It is said that after the death of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1928-1979), Zia ul Haq was keen to build an alternative leadership to the PPP in each province, especially in Punjab.¹⁷ This was in anticipation of the inevitable return of Benazir into politics that needed to be countered politically. General Jilani (1925-1999) persuaded Zia to choose Nawaz Sharif and groom him for leadership.¹⁸ Nawaz had the added advantage of having a personnel grudge with Bhutto family as their *Ittefaq* Foundry was nationalised by ZA Bhutto in early 1970s.¹⁹

Largely that was the background due to which Nawaz had no respect and liking for Benazir. On the other hand, Benazir opined that her party mandate was snatched by rigging in the 1988 elections and PPP was deprived to form government in the biggest province of Pakistan.²⁰ Punjab is a wealthy and big province having 56% share in the whole population of the country at that time. Ousted from the Punjab meant ousted from half of the Pakistan. The central government would have faced many issues of governance if the opposition government was installed in the Punjab. Well aware of this she did not accept the Punjab government from the day first and planned to bring the PPP government instead. She activated the provincial leadership of the PPP to purchase the votes of independent members for in-house change. Rana Shaukat Mehmood (1939-2019), the opposition leader in the Punjab assembly and Farooq Ahmad Khan Leghari (1940-2010), a close associate of Benazir met with several independent candidates and urge them to join the PPP.²¹ This move was unsuccessful because Nawaz was enjoying the confidence of Army Chief and President Ghulam Ishaq Khan (1915-2006). Without this support there were strong chances of his removal because according to Farooq Leghari, PPP required the vote of twenty five members to bring in-house change in Punjab.²²

Having been failed to bring the desired in-house change, Benazir decided to dominate through Governor and bureaucracy of the Province. She appointed General (retired) Tikka Khan (1915-2002), as Governor of the Punjab. Tikka Khan was an ex-army chief and a close associate of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. He was considered the bitter enemy of Nawaz Sharif. His appointment was disliked by the Punjab government and a demand was moved for his immediate removal. The appointment of Tikka Khan added fuel to the confrontation. Through an ordinance he lifted ban on students unions which were banned five years ago without intimating the Punjab government.²³ His step largely annoyed the Punjab government. Meanwhile in early 1989, without consulting Chief Minister of the province, Benazir's government called back five federal officers from Punjab who was working on key positions, alleging that they were involved in political manoeuvring.²⁴ Subsequently, she appointed new Chief Secretary and Inspector General of the police, in the Punjab.²⁵ It was a common practice that the Chief Minister of the province was taken into confidence prior to any such appointment of federal officer on key positions. Nawaz Sharif refused to relieve the Chief Secretary and declined to accept these appointees and sent these officers back to Islamabad.²⁶ In addition, he threatened to remove scores of other federal civil servants, holding positions in the Punjab government, and to replace them with others officers from the Punjab Civil Services.²⁷ After a large hue and cry and exchange of harsh words, the Punjab government at the end accepted the transfer of the four officers but in the case of Chief Secretary Mr Anwar Zahid, the Federal government's instructions to transfer him to Islamabad were successfully resisted.²⁸ The simmering tension between the Punjab government and the Centre had badly tarnished the political stature of Benazir. Her government was seen by the people of Punjab as reactionary and inept.

In late July 1989, Lieutenant General (Ret) Fazle Haq (1928-1991), the former Governor and Chief Minister of the then NWFP, who was a close friend of Zia ul Haq was arrested on charges of involvement in the murder of Syed Arif al-Hussain Husseni (1946-1988).²⁹ Fazle Haq was a Member of the National Assembly and NWFP Provincial President of the PML.³⁰ It was for the first time in the history of Pakistan that a military general was arrested on ground of alleged assassination. Benazir was suspected to be involved in the arrest of Haq. The IJI accused that the arrest of Fazle Haq was aimed at weakening the Muslim League of which he was the strongest leader after Nawaz Sharif. Soon after Haq's arrest, the Punjab government in retaliation issued arrest warrant of Mukhtar Awan, an active member of PPP and Federal Minister of Labour and Manpower on a murder charge.

The simmering tension between the Centre and the Punjab was further escalated in late July of 1989 when the Federal government refused to provide railway wagons to the Ittefaq group, an industrial house owned by Nawaz Sharif and his family.³¹ The Ittefaq group had been complaining about discriminatory duties and financial embargo on its ventures imposed by the Federal government. Ittefaq group now had been denied the railway wagons it needed to unload 2,800 tons of scrap iron from a ship anchored off Karachi port and transfer the iron to its foundries near Lahore.³² Ittefaq group claimed to have had a contract since 1980 with Pakistan Railways, to be provided twelve hundreds wagons every forty days, and was their biggest private customer.³³ The dispatch of another ship bringing in more scrap iron was cancelled, costing Ittefaq millions of rupees.

Consequently, more than half of Ittefaq's plants were shut down and some 3,500 employees were laid off.³⁴

Nawaz Sharif emphasized that the Federal government's refusal to provide the wagons was the cause of this lay-offs. Backed by the Punjab government the workers staged a sit-in at Lahore on a Railway track in protest. As a result, trains coming from Karachi and destined for Lahore, Rawalpindi, and Peshawar had to be re-routed. The protesters first gave the impression that they were protesting against layoffs but soon it came to light that the episode had been organized by the Punjab government. Instead of protesting against their employers, the unemployed workers raised slogans against the Federal government for its denial to provide required number of wagons to Ittefaq foundry. They gave two days ultimatum to the Railway Department to provide wagons failing with they expressed to block other Railway tracks. The Federal government refused to give in to the blackmail and ordered the Punjab Rangers, which comes under the command of the Federal Interior Minister to prevent a new blockade of the rail track.

In another move, when the Central government of PPP had shown reluctance to pay loans to the IJI politicians particularly the industrial one, the Punjab government reacted by setting up its own provincial bank naming "The Bank of Punjab".³⁵ The Federal government termed it unconstitutional and refused the grant of recognition from the State Bank of Pakistan.³⁶ Although Benazir protested against this action, the Punjab government could point out that the establishment of a provincial bank fell within the domain of a provincial legislature.³⁷ Nawaz Sharif ordered all the Punjab institutions to withdraw their sum from the national banks and deposit it in the Bank of Punjab.³⁸ To build pressure on Benazir, the Punjab government called for convening the meeting of the Council of Common Interests (CCI) and the establishment of the National Finance Commission (NFC) in keeping with the constitutional obligations of the Central government. PPP was hesitant to call the CCI meeting because the Constitution allowed the provinces to bring the matter into joint sitting of the Parliament if they are dissatisfied with the decisions made in the meeting; PPP was reluctant because in the upper house IJI was in majority and in joint sitting the table could be turned in IJI side.³⁹ The government also did not constitute NFC which would have made the distribution of revenues mandatory in accordance with the NFC award.⁴⁰

Another important incident which widened the rift between the Federal government and the Punjab was the launch of People's Work Plan by the Central government.⁴¹ The Plan aimed to do development works in the field of health, education, construction of roads, water and sanitation in the provinces through the PPP members of National and Provincial assemblies and a sum of two billion rupees was allocated for this lucrative project.⁴² The members of opposition political parties were deprived of these funds. The Punjab government vehemently protested against this discrimination and demanded for equal distribution of funds among opposition members of National Assembly.⁴³ The Law Minister of the Punjab accused that the projects under People's Work Plan were started prior to fulfilling any legal formalities. Moreover, the Federal government is building schools and health care centres without transferring land to the Departments.⁴⁴ The Punjab government called it a unique plan ignoring all the legal procedure and without the participation of provincial governments and local bodies.⁴⁵

In late September 1989, two officers of the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) conducted a raid on a Lahore based soft-drink factory owned jointly by the sons of General Akhtar

Abdur Rehman,⁴⁶ and Sharif family. The FIA alleged that the owners were evading excise duty by declaring only half of their actual production.⁴⁷ The Punjab government ordered the police to arrest the Federal officers.⁴⁸ The FIA officers were charged of harassing the factory's security guards, and police confiscated their investigation record. It took several days to bail out the Federal officers. The Interior Minister stated that the FIA officers had been investigating evasion of income tax, excise and custom duties as well as theft of electricity by one of the biggest industrial tycoon of the country widely taken to mean Sharif's Ittefaq group. The official statement added that the arrest of the FIA officials came in the wake of several other acts aimed at subverting the Constitution and the authority of the Federal government. It went on saying that "rebellion" by the Punjab government was being examined. In retaliation, the Federal government recalled to Islamabad two senior police officials and two other senior civil servants who were believed to be closely associated with Nawaz Sharif. But Nawaz Sharif refused to release them.

The situation turned so tense that when on 23rd March 1990, Benazir announced to hold a gathering at Minar-e-Pakistan in commemoration of Pakistan Resolution, the Punjab government refused to grant permission.⁴⁹ The Punjab government pretended that Nawaz Sharif had already decided to hold gathering on the same place and same day.⁵⁰ This was an embarrassing situation for the Federal government and if it insisted the gathering this would directly led towards confrontation with the Punjab government. Benazir settled the issue wisely and ready to hold the gathering at Miner-e-Pakistan three days earlier.⁵¹

One of the major excuses of Nawaz Sharif for defying the Federal government had been to protect provincial autonomy. He accused the Federal government of unconstitutional interference with the province's autonomy and his authority as the Chief Minister by clipping down Punjab's fiscal allocation. Besides setting up a provincial bank, Nawaz also declared his intention to establish a power distribution authority so that the province could provide electricity according to its own priorities.⁵² Sardar Nasrullah Khan Dreshak(b:1942) and Shah Mehmud Qureshi(1956), members of Nawaz's cabinet argued at a news conference that under Article 157 of the Constitution, a provincial government was entitled to distribute power, purchased from the Centre's network, according to its requirements. They alleged that the PPP government had selected villages for electrification according to its own political interests and houses of PML supporters were intentionally ignored. Electricity was provided to them only after they promised to vote for the PPP in the next elections.

Although Nawaz Sharif's opposition to the Central government in the name of provincial autonomy had cast him in a role of champion of provincial rights, it might be essential to point out that Nawaz Sharif's strong stance on provincial autonomy was a recent phenomenon. During the martial law regime of Zia-ul Haq, when he was part of the provincial cabinet and later as Chief Minister of the Punjab during the era of Muhammad Khan Junejo (1932-1993), he never raised voice for provincial autonomy and had not said a single word against the Centre.⁵³ The reason was obvious; he was close to Zia who also introduced him into active politics. As all other military rulers, Zia wanted strong Centre so Nawaz Sharif had to line up with his mentor. This time the Centre was ruled by the political opponents of Nawaz Sharif, therefore; one can argue that Nawaz Sharif and other IJI leaders were engaged in a microscopic examination of the Constitution with a view to discovering more subjects falling in the province's domain.

Conclusion:

The dual between the Centre and Punjab government had brought little success to Benazir as her government could not overcome the hostility with Punjab, and it resorted to the same sort of tactics which hampered governance in the country. Benazir tried to instigate the people to agitate the public against Nawaz Sharif in the Punjab by accusing the Provincial government of corruption and of employing provincial civil servants to harass and persecute the PPP legislators and political workers but could succeed only in contributing to hate politics and harming the political culture of the country. Nawaz Sharif, on the other hand, had nothing to lose.⁵⁴ His open defiance of Benazir strengthened the general perception that her government lacked power and did not command real authority. All this was adding fuel to her adversaries' campaign to push the idea that she has an inept team bereft of political initiatives. In fact, even Nawaz's critics among the IJI had to admit that he was the most forceful politician against Benazir and, thus, an indispensable player in this political game of accusations and counter accusations.⁵⁵ Nawaz Sharif's biggest success for a man who was regarded during the Zia's era as a minor figure was that he had emerged in the public's eye a politician of prime ministerial stature. His rivals in the IJI dare not oppose him for fear of being accused of pulling down the most effective opponent of Benazir Bhutto. Sharif realized and believed that attacking the Federal government of Benazir would provide him with the best defence for his political survival. An end to confrontation would mean the political elimination of Nawaz Sharif, which he would not like under any circumstances. Similarly, if he adopted a course of peace, other provinces would forget him and thus he would not be able to face Benazir in the next general elections. It was in his political interest to continue the hostile attitude towards the Prime Minister and the PPP. This was the reason that in spite of efforts of many politicians the confrontation between the Punjab and the Centre was never ended during the first tenure of Benazir's government.

Benazir was also becoming aware that with Nawaz Sharif's intact in the Punjab she would not be able to win the next election. Totally preoccupied with the continuing Centre-Punjab squabbles, the Government machinery came to a halt, and both the Governments in Islamabad and Lahore were unable to do the job for which they were elected. Particularly, the conflict with Punjab government was one of the major causes of the dismissal of Benazir's government. Had she been able to maintain cordial relations with Nawaz Sharif, the situation might have been quite different and her government would have been able to complete its Constitutional tenure. The Central government could focus on good governance and delivered in a much better way if it would have good relations with the Punjab government. Though Nawaz Sharif was largely responsible for the squabbling, it was also the failure of Benazir that she could not repair her relations with him. Neither she made any sincere effort to resume dialogue and settled the differences through talks. Conversely, she tried to suppress her political rivals with power and used state machinery for this purpose.

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- ¹⁰ Iqbal Akhund, *Trial and Error: the Advent and Eclipse of Benazir Bhutto* (Karachi: Oxford University Press,2000),55.
- ¹¹ Sartaj Aziz, *Between Dreams and Reality: Some Milestones in Pakistan's History* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2009) P, 97. IJI captured 108 seats out of 240 seats while PPP secured 94. Thirty two independent candidates gave to the assembly.
- ¹² There was pre poll rigging in the elections. Moreover, the independent members were pressurized to vote for Nawaz Sharif, the IJI candidate for Chief Minister Ship.
- ¹³ Iqbal Akhund, *Trial and error: the Advent and Eclipse of Benazir Bhutto*, P,46.
- ¹⁴ PPP obtained fifty-two seats from Punjab as compare to IJI which secured forty five seats.
- ¹⁵ Hussain Haqqani, *Pakistan: between Mosque and Military* (Lahore: Vanguard Books, 2005) P, 210.
- ¹⁶ The Dawn Karachi, 4 December 1988.
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- ²⁴ The Inspector General of Police, the Superintend of Police, Information Secretary, the Additional Chief Secretary and the Chief Secretary in the Punjab were transferred from the Punjab to Islamabad.
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- ²⁷ Ibid,60-61
- ²⁸ Mushahid Hussain & Akmal Hussain, *Pakistan Problems of Governance* (Lahore: Vanguard Book, 1993) P,15.

- ²⁹ Arif Hussain Hussaini was a renowned Shia cleric and a bitter critic of the Zia's policy of Islamisation. He was assassinated at his hometown in Para Chanar in 1988 just few days before the death of Zia. It was alleged that Zia had a hand behind the assassination of Hussaini.
- ³⁰ Haq was the close associate and active member of Zia ul Haq's cabinet. He remained on several key positions during Zia's rule and it is speculated by many people that he earned money by using unfair means. He was believed to have acquired fortune of several billion dollars through illegal involvements in narcotic trade.
- ³¹ Iqbal Akhund, *Trial and Error: the Advent and Eclipse of Benazir Bhutto*, P,65.
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- ³⁴ Ibid, 177.
- ³⁵ Hamid Yousaf: *Pakistan A Study of Political Development*, P, 229.
- ³⁶ Daily Dawn Karachi, 26 June 1989.
- ³⁷ Hamid Yousaf: *Pakistan: A Study of Political Development*, P, 229.
- ³⁸ Daily Jang Rawalpindi, 2 July 1989.
- ³⁹ The members of senate were elected as a result of 1985 election. PPP had boycotted in these elections so there were only four PPP members in the senate out of eighty seven members.
- ⁴⁰ Hamid Yousaf: *Pakistan A Study of Political Development*, P,229
- ⁴¹ Iqbal Akhund, *Trial and Error: the Advent and Eclipse of Benazir Bhutto*, P,66.
- ⁴² The Herald, May 1989.
- ⁴³ The Pakistan Times, 14 July 1989.
- ⁴⁴ The Pakistan Times, 14 July 1989.
- ⁴⁵ The Muslim, April 30, 1989.
- ⁴⁶ General Akhtar was one of the General Zia's close associates at the time of the coup against ZA Bhutto. He served as DGISI during Russia-Afghan war and played a key role in the war. In 1987 he was replaced by General Hamid Gul and appointed as Joint Chief of Army Staff. Akhtar was among those generals who were with Zia ul Haq when his plane was crashed in 1988.
- ⁴⁷ M. Ali Shaikh, *Benazir Bhutto: A Political Biography*, P,118.
- ⁴⁸ Daily Dawn Karachi, 22 September 1989.
- ⁴⁹ The Muslims of subcontinent demanded separate country for the first time from the platform of All India Muslim League on 23 March 1940 and passed historic Lahore Resolution on the same place where Minar-e-Pakistan is erected.
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- ⁵⁵ Ibid,71.