

Ishaq Khan seizes control in Pakistan

by Ramtanu Maitra

On April 18, after months of power struggle between the President and the prime minister, Army troops surrounded the state-controlled radio and television stations, and an hour later President Ghulam Ishaq Khan dismissed the Nawaz Sharif government and dissolved the duly elected National Assembly. A three-member caretaker cabinet headed by Balkh Sher Mazari has been named, and it is expected that the cabinet will be expanded soon. In this action, as in his earlier dismissal of the elected Benazir Bhutto government, the Pakistani President exercised the power acquired through the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution, a legacy of military dictator Zia ul-Haq.

The crisis that led to the dissolution of the National Assembly and sacking of the Sharif government, a repeat of the Aug. 8, 1990 sacking of the Bhutto government, had reached the flashpoint on April 17, when Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, in a national broadcast, pointed to the "dirty conspiracies" hatched against him, leaving no one in doubt who he thought was the mastermind. Following that broadcast, Ishaq Khan, head of Pakistan's powerful bureaucracy, sought the Army's approval and the opposition leader Miss Bhutto's support before making the proclamation. Miss Bhutto, with the likely approval of the United States, flew from London on April 17 to meet with the President, giving support to the final move against Nawaz Sharif.

New elections scheduled

Since then, the President has announced that fresh elections to reconstitute the National Assembly will be held on July 14, within the three-month period stipulated by the Eighth Amendment, even as the Speaker of the dissolved National Assembly, Gohar Ayub Khan, has challenged the dissolution in the High Court, calling it *mala fide* and *ultra vires* (in bad faith and beyond the President's legal authority).

The dissolution of the Nawaz government came a week after the prime minister, prompted by complaints from Gulf emirates, had moved to arrest Arabs who were in the Northwest Frontier Province of Pakistan without a valid visa. Allegedly, Arabs who had come to Pakistan to fight with the Afghani mujahideen against the Soviet Union had not gone back to their home countries, and now represent a terrorist, drug-infested force with ties to Iranian and Egyptian terrorism.

There is also evidence that Nawaz Sharif, in contrast to either President Ishaq Khan or the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), had wanted to cooperate with India to track down criminal elements who had allegedly carried out the March 12 serial bombing in Bombay that killed over 300 people, and who had then fled to Pakistan.

On April 8, Nawaz Sharif announced a task force to investigate and arrest suspects in the Bombay bombing, and also proclaimed his policy to round up alleged Islamic militants.

The Pakistani ISI reports to Ishaq Khan, not the prime minister, and is believed to be complicit in the Bombay bombings. Observers in New Delhi now fear that Nawaz's removal will pave the way for a policy of unhindered provocations against India.

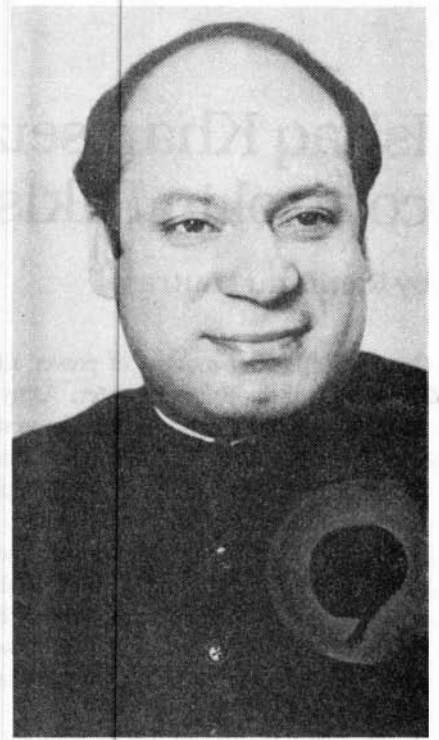
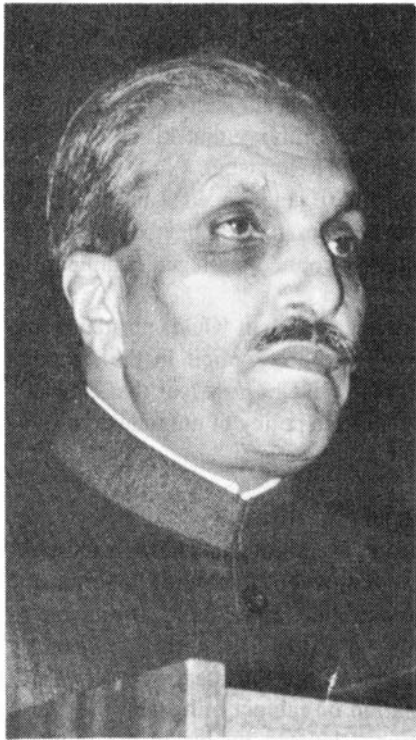
Another execution in the offing?

In his dissolution order, President Ishaq Khan listed eight different charges for the removal of the Sharif government. Among them were: mass resignations of the opposition members from the Assembly—a gift handed to the President by Benazir Bhutto, the leader of the Pakistani People's Party (PPP)—and the resignation of cabinet ministers; the "false and malicious allegations" leveled by the prime minister against the President; misadministration, nepotism, and corruption in the federal government; and the reign of terror against the opposition. Nawaz was also accused of misuse of the resources and agencies of the government for personal gain, causing "massive wastage and dissipation of public funds and assets at the cost of the national exchequer . . . resulting in increased deficit financing indebtedness."

But the most significant of the allegations came from Begum Nuzhat Nawaz, widow of the late Chief of Army Staff, Gen. Asif Nawaz Janjua, who died suddenly of a heart attack while jogging on Jan. 8, but whose death one medical report says was the result of slow poisoning. Nuzhat Nawaz told reporters that her husband had been poisoned. Citing Janjua's widow's charge, Ishaq Khan's charge sheet against the government says that the allegations "indicate that the highest functionaries of the federal government have been subverting the authority of the Armed Forces and the machinery of the government and the Constitution itself."

Ironically, it is Ishaq Khan who most profited from the early exit of Army chief Janjua. The President replaced Janjua with Gen. Abdul Waheed Kakkar, superseding a number of senior generals. With little independent base, Kakkar, it is believed, will be content to remain in the President's orbit.

If Nawaz Sharif continues to exhibit belligerence, it is likely that the President will pursue the case vigorously until someone close to Nawaz Sharif, or even Nawaz Sharif himself, is hanged for the alleged crime. The Pakistani establishment has already hanged one prime minister, the late Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and has the colluded power to repeat the same scenario.



Left, the late military dictator Zia ul-Haq, whose Eighth Amendment to the Constitution allowed Pakistani President Ghulam Ishaq Khan the power to dismiss the government. Center, Benazir Bhutto, the former premier sacked in a similar move in 1990, supported the ouster of her successor, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif (right).

The real issue

The core problem with Nawaz Sharif's ouster is the Eighth Amendment bill, passed in 1985 by Zia ul-Haq ostensibly to concentrate executive power. The amendment, which consists of 100 clauses, results in a system revolving around an indirectly elected President, not answerable to any parliamentary forum, who is permitted to remove governments and to dissolve the National Assembly and provincial assemblies at will.

In March, Prime Minister Nawaz had announced in the Senate, the Upper House of the National Assembly, that the Eighth Amendment needed revision. The opposition People's Democratic Alliance, dominated by the Pakistani People's Party, first agreed to support the prime minister, but then backed out. Although Sharif then also backed down, it was too late—he had become by that time a target of the President's wrath.

Ishaq Khan, the senior most civil servant in Pakistan, has made many inroads into the military, and because of his wide-ranging actual power, garnered over two decades of close proximity to the highest echelons, he is the most powerful conduit for foreign powers dealing with Pakistan. He is also the country's chief negotiator with the International Monetary Fund and World Bank.

By contrast, Nawaz Sharif, an industrialist, is a Johnny-come-lately to Pakistani politics. A complete outsider to the

Pakistani establishment who was handpicked by Zia ul-Haq, Nawaz was tolerated because of his organizing capabilities and willingness to challenge the established, yet despised by the establishment, Pakistani People's Party.

There are indications now that Ishaq Khan is fully prepared to bring Pakistan back fully to the establishment circles. His selection for caretaker prime minister is Balk Sher Mazari, a Baluch landlord who is based in Dera Ghazi Khan in south Punjab, and whose real estate spans three provinces—Punjab, Northwest Frontier Province, and Baluchistan. Not known for his political skills and handpicked by Zia ul-Haq for the Senate, Mazari belongs to the Mazari tribe, which claims its origin in Syria and the southern Caspian Sea.

The caretaker cabinet has two other members, both of them landlords of immense wealth, one each from the PPP and the ruling IJI.

Besides assuring that the Pakistani Muslim League, the major party of the IJI, is not represented by anyone who is hostile to the Eighth Amendment, the President will also want to see closely fought elections in which no party could come in with a sweeping majority. A divided house is easier to control and does not raise the threat of a parliamentary coup leading to the nullification of the Eighth Amendment, which is not likely to figure as an issue in the election campaign itself.