

## From New Delhi by Paul Zykofsky

### Student demos shake Pakistani regime

*Unrest in the Punjab is forcing the government to seek diplomatic solutions.*

The Pakistani military junta of General Zia Ul-Haq was clearly shaken by the wave of student demonstrations and sometimes violent clashes with police which swept across the country during the third week of February. For the first time in more than three years, since Zia took power in a July 1977 coup against the government of Prime Minister Z. A. Bhutto, large numbers of people took to the streets in a public display of the widespread hatred of the regime that everyone knows lies just below the surface.

The junta called a panicked emergency meeting of the cabinet attended by all four provincial governors and the army corps commanders on Feb. 21. Orders were issued to close most of the colleges and universities in two provinces, the key province of the Punjab and the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP), where the most severe clashes were reported.

More revealing was the house arrest and ban on travel imposed by police on Bhutto's widow, Begum Nusrat Bhutto and his daughter Benazir, who now lead the Pakistan Peoples Party, founded by Bhutto, and the core of opposition to the regime.

Only a couple of weeks ago the Bhutto home in Karachi was the scene of a meeting of the leaders of nine political parties, almost all the parties in the country except for the rightist Islamic fundamentalist Jamaati Islami, which supports the

junta. There, the formation of an alliance, the Movement to Restore Democracy, was announced, demanding an end to the martial law regime, an end to censorship and repression of open political activity, and calling for immediate free national elections.

The students who were out in the streets were openly supporting this movement and its goals. Their actions were sparked by junta moves to crack down on political activity on the campuses after the sweeping victory of the PPP-linked Pakistan Student Federation in student elections in the NWFP and the Punjab. The victory was over previously entrenched student groups affiliated with the fanatic Muslim Brotherhood-tied Jamaati Islami.

Observers in New Delhi have not missed the importance of these happenings in their neighbor's land. While news of these events goes largely unreported in the West, it has been front-page news for days in India.

The first thoughts, including among government circles, concern the impact of this on the Zia regime's tightrope diplomacy over the Afghanistan situation. On the principle of one step forward, two steps back, the regime has been exploring diplomatic openings for talks with Moscow and Kabul, with one eye cocked on Washington to see if a better deal is available from that corner.

The signs of shakiness at home

tend to strengthen the hands of those in Pakistan who argue that a deal must be reached on Afghanistan if that regime is to survive. The Afghan issue, and the prevalent feeling among Pakistanis that the regime has been playing with fire for no good reason, as well as burdening the country with over 1 million Afghan refugees, is crucial to current events. In a recent interview with the BBC, Benazir Bhutto made a point of criticizing the provocative policies of the regime and calling for a political solution, including establishing cordial relations with the Babruk Karmal regime in Afghanistan.

Privately, Indian officials do not conceal their view of the Zia regime as an unstable dictatorship whose instability could lead to widening conflict in the region. While no steps can or would be taken to encourage its downfall, it is certain that few tears would be shed here over its demise, particularly in favor of a civilian government.

More arrests have now followed, and Zia is reported to have declared that "the government remains determined to prevent lawlessness." Things may be calm for the moment because of outright repression but close observers here are convinced there is more turmoil to come. The fact that the demonstrations, which struck every major city in the country, included the Punjab, the home of the majority of the country and the stronghold of the army, is highly significant. As any Pakistan-watcher can tell you, as the Punjab goes, so goes the country. And no one forgets that student protest has been the leading edge of popular unrest that has in the past brought down two previous military regimes.