**[Beyond Bhutto](https://www.dawn.com/news/1825351/beyond-bhutto)**

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THE morning of April 4, 1979, lingers in the memory. I woke up to get ready for school, and found my mother red-eyed. Even before she uttered a word, I guessed the worst had come to pass. She tearfully confirmed it. A detestable military regime had killed Pakistan’s first elected prime minister.

It wasn’t entirely a surprise, but it was undoubtedly a shock. Many Pakistanis had harboured the hope of a last-minute rep­rieve of some sort. Almost every country with which Pakistan had diplomatic relations had appealed for clemency. (A notable exception was Suharto’s Indonesian reg­ime.) I have long suspected that at least two countries, had they so wished, could have exerted enough pressure to save Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s life: Saudi Arabia and the US.

Both of them chose not to do so. The executioner, Gen Ziaul Haq, dismissed the global appeals as an initiative on behalf of the international union of politicians. Benazir Bhutto’s Daughter of the East notes that even the Supreme Court that had upheld the Lahore High Court’s death sentence by a 4-3 margin unanimously recommended that the sentence be commuted. But Zia ignored that inconvenient opinion. He was convinced by that stage that there was just one coffin that lay in wait — either for him or for ZAB. The latter, at an obvious disadvantage, was inevitably destined to draw the short straw.

Thus it was that Pakistan’s unfortunate history took a particularly sordid turn 45 years ago tomorrow. One can only conjecturally imagine what might have come to pass if the army had not intervened in July 1977, and the government-opposition agreement on fresh elections (after the tainted exercise earlier that year) had not been pre-empted by Zia’s coup.

Much worse lay ahead after ZAB was eliminated.

No one can deny that the regime ZAB presided over from December 1971 to mid-1977 was, at best, a flawed democracy. The initial signs were positive, once martial law had been lifted. One could even argue for 1972 as a golden year in Pakistan’s rebirth as a truncated entity — except for the fact that it involved no reckoning with the previous year’s massacres in what had by then emerged as Bangladesh.

In 1973, many of the hopes fell apart, notably with the National Awami Party-led provincial governments in Balochistan and NWFP being swept aside; the anti-Ahmadi legislation followed in 1974. By then, not only had the NAP leadership been incarcerated on ludicrous charges, but many among the PPP left-leaning stalwarts had been sidelined, and replaced with time-servers and feudal lightweights who were quick to abandon the PPP in or soon after 1977.

One can’t decisively pinpoint the trajectory of Pakistan’s progress had the military not intervened at that point, but it’s safe to assume that any regression under civilian rule would have been less harmful. It’s easy to say that to pick the obsequious Gen Zia as military chief was Bhutto’s deadliest error. But unleashing Zia’s predecessor, Gen Tikka — the ‘Butcher of Bengal’ — on Bal­o­chistan was another huge mistake. Sett­ing up the paramilitary Federal Secu­rity Force was also a misstep that backfired when Masood Mahmood’s very possibly fake testimony proved crucial in condemning ZAB to death. By any measure, it ought not to have sufficed as the basis for a death sentence, but Zia and Maulvi Mushtaq, the Lahore High Court chief justice miffed by Bhutto holding back his promotion, were happy to clutch at straws.

The progress of the subsequent Supreme Court appeal ought to serve as a reminder that the six Islamabad High Court judges currently complaining about military int­er­ference are hardly treading fresh gro­und. In 1978-79, the nine-member bench — expected to rule by 5-4 in Bhutto’s favour — was, by hook or by crook, whittled down to seven, reversing the balance to 4-3 against ZAB. And the three who dared to say no did so in the face of tremendous pressures and a variety of threats.

Last month’s belated Supreme Court verdict, recognising that Bhutto did not get a fair trial, merely aligns the senior judiciary with what has long been public knowledge. The dubious verdict cannot be rescinded, and the extreme punishment, carried out with unseemly haste, is anyhow an indelible stain on post-1971 Pakistan.

ZAB’s judicial (but profoundly injudicious) murder cut him down in his prime, aged just 51. His younger son Shahnawaz died at 26, Mir Murtaza was assassinated at 42, Benazir at 54. The Muslim world’s broader malaise is reflected in the fact that ZAB was the third among the luminaries at the Lahore Islamic Summit 50 years ago to be eliminated, preceded by Saudi king Faisal and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975, and followed by Egypt’s Anwar Sadat in 1981 and Libya’s Muammar Gadhafi 30 years later.

In the Bhutto context, though, what comes across most poignantly is the steady decline in the nation’s fortunes following his elimination.

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