

Dissent and terror in Punjab

THERE is perhaps some logic to these units of time, to the ends and fresh starts. Here *Dawn* sums up the old — the year 2007 — and sets the tone for the course of future events in two important cities of Punjab, Lahore and Rawalpindi, the last proving to be the venue of Benazir Bhutto's assassination.

Lahore experienced its coldest day since 1935 on Jan 5 last, and it could only get warmer from there. But by the end of 2007, the city was still struggling to shrug off the effects of a long freeze. Having played a subdued role since the ouster of Nawaz Sharif from the office of the prime minister in 1999, March 2007 onwards the city became the venue for a struggle by lawyers supported by civil society minus the political parties.

Politics received a fillip in November when the leaders of the two biggest political parties in the country, Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto, finally returned after a long gap.

Talk of election — presidential and general — echoed in the province throughout the year. Alongside, efforts for a multi-party conference continued until the meeting was held in July in London under the aegis of the Sharif brothers. The meeting, or more precisely the divide, that crystallised had a huge impact on politics in Punjab.

Amid strong rumours that it was holding secret parleys with President Musharraf's emissaries for a rapprochement, the PPP refused to join an opposition alliance established to launch a movement for the restoration of democracy. With or without formal acknowledgment of the fact on his part, as Ms Benazir Bhutto compromised with a president who was still in uniform, Mr Sharif's status as an alternative to the PPP leader was revived for the establishment's benefit. The Sharif family, in exile since Dec 2000, came back to the country on Nov 25, 2007, just one month and seven days after Ms Bhutto's return to Pakistan on Oct 18.

The Sharifs delayed their announcement to take part in the Jan 8 polls to the advantage of the establishment's more recent favourites, the Chaudhries of Gujrat. Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi, Punjab chief minister (now former), used the last few months of his stint campaigning and preparing for the election. He resorted to the old formula of preferring personality over party.

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federal capital's inseparable partner in the power equation) Rawalpindi was the target of some of the most devastating suicide bombings of 2007. In suicide strikes in the city in September, October, November and December, scores of precious lives were lost. The country's military establishment that is headquartered in the city was the apparent target in most attacks.

An attack that may have killed up to 35 people, many of them employed with the defence ministry, came on Nov 24. Earlier, on the morning of Nov 1, a suicide bomber rammed his motorcycle into a bus killing eight air force officers and four civilians in the Punjab town of Sargodha. The town is the biggest base of the Pakistan Air Force.

Suicide attacks in Punjab picked up after the July storming of the Lal Masjid in Islamabad and the fear was so strong that for some time in August and September, bunkers were created around police stations all over the province to protect these protectors of the people against a possible terrorist attack.

In the event, it was another occurrence in Islamabad whose ramifications in Punjab hogged the headlines for most of the year: the March 9 presidential reference against the chief justice of Pakistan, Iftikhar Mohammad Chaudhry.

Lawyers in Lahore began the year on the streets as they protested the January murder of the additional advocate-general of Punjab, Arif Bhinder, in the heart of the provincial metropolis. By December, they were still out in strength, and the discontent had spread to all corners of Punjab as they pressed for the restoration of the judiciary. The high point in their struggle came in May when Chief Justice Chaudhry travelled in a motorcade from Islamabad to Lahore 'to have dinner' with members of the bar. The journey, piloted by leading lawyers such as Aitzaz Ahsan and Hamid Khan, took the 'chief' some 25 hours — five times longer than the usual time.

A large number of people greeted the justice caravan in the Punjab capital and on either side of the G.T. Road. Facilitated by the presence of a vibrant media, the expectations for a movement that extended out of the lawyers' circle and to the people at large were raised briefly. The hope remained unfulfilled; the moment, for what it was worth, was allowed to pass. The justice party did not materialise and the chief justice chose to fight his battle in the court instead of seeking to use his ouster as a base for a greater struggle.

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Illustration by Abro

deals with the military ruler and could now do without legal liabilities.

The lawyers fought it out on their own, bruised and brutalised by the state in an unprecedented manner. Hundreds of lawyers were arrested, judges were detained but the struggle continued. The boycott of the courts all over the province and elsewhere in the country had a most telling effect on the government.

The movement reached its crescendo in the period after the imposition of emergency in the country on Nov 3. The lawyers refused to appear in the courts of judges who had taken a fresh oath of office under the new Provisional Constitution Order and vowed that they would take no part in the election scheduled for Jan 8.

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By the time the elections were announced for Jan 8, 2008, members of his team right up to Pakistan Muslim League president Chaudhry Shujaat Husain were heard saying that the elections were won by 'strong' candidates and not by political parties.

On the first day of 2007, the newspaper reported after a survey of graveyards in Rawalpindi that space in the city was shrinking for even the dead. Gory as it may have sounded, it turned out to be an apt prelude to a most violent year in Rawalpindi's history.

Islamabad's far worse-off twin (but the

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Justice Chaudhry and his comrades among the lawyers had to keep their distance from political parties in an effort to avoid giving a partisan colour to their movement. Consequently, the Mall in Lahore became a venue for a series of parallel processions taken out by lawyers and political activists respectively. Initially, the politicians wanted a merger that the lawyers resisted. By the time the lawyers thought that they needed to ally themselves with 'outside forces' for a joint struggle, political parties had cut their

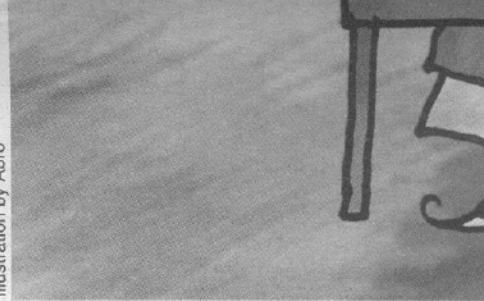


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They received unlikely support from campuses in Lahore, especially from the so-called elitist institutions. Imran Khan, the Pakistan Tehrik-i-Insaaf chairman, did make a rather half-hearted attempt to provide the students with a leader in November. He failed in the face of campus toughs belonging to the Jamiat Tulaba-i-Islam.

Imran Khan decided that his future lay with Jamaat-i-Islami chief Qazi Hussain Ahmed, leaving thousands of anti-Jamiat

students at Punjab University to protest the humiliation he had suffered at the hands of the Jamiat on Nov 14 by themselves. But for the widespread resistance put up by the judges in the wake of the Nov 3 PCO, the anti-Jamiat rallies at the Punjab University after a decades' long lull would have been the most remarkable anti-status quo event of 2007.

Also noteworthy was the Higher Education Commission's perseverance in trying to control the monster of plagiarism among college and university teachers in Punjab who had sought an easy way to a PhD degree and the Supreme Court's resolve to rid Lahore of its illegal buildings. Indeed, a Supreme Court justice deposed as a consequence of the Nov 3 PCO mentioned the cases against illegal constructions as a possible reason for the removal of the judges.

By the time the PCO came, action had already been taken against some of the illegal 'plazas' in Lahore. Among the buildings razed was one constructed by a business enterprise dealing in kidneys. The administrator of the concern and the doctors associated with it were for some time held in custody after a case of forced kidney extraction was registered with a local police station. The accused were
