

Lest we forget - The 1968 revolt in Pakistan

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IT is salutary to recall that one of the most potent popular rebellions in Pakistan was sparked by goods worth Rs5,000. Sure, that meant a great deal more 50 years ago, but even so it was a pretty paltry amount in comparison with what the chief beneficiaries of Ayub Khan's "the decade of development" were presumably banking every other day.

But it mattered a great deal to the bunch of students from Rawalpindi's Gordon College who had ventured into Pakistan's duty-free capital, Landikotal, in early November 1968 and bought goodies worth that much, only to have them confiscated on the way out. They were technically in breach of the law, but perfectly well aware that anyone with a modicum of influence could shop to their heart's content in the tribal territories outpost and usually bring the goods home without serious trouble.

They complained to and consulted their fellow students, and agreement emerged on staging a protest on Nov 7, 1968. It so happened that on the same day students at a polytechnic on the outskirts of what served as the nation's interim capital while Islamabad was being constructed were expecting a visit, and a characteristically fiery speech, from an estranged former stalwart of the Ayub regime.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was denied the opportunity of speaking at the polytechnic, and eventually drove on to Rawalpindi's InterContinental hotel, where a substantial delegation from Gordon College had gathered to greet him.

One of the potent revolts in Pakistan was sparked 50 years ago.

The police overreacted. A young man was shot dead. And the relatively restricted protests in Rawalpindi spiralled into mass action that within four months led to the end of the Ayub regime and, soon afterwards, to the promise of democracy based for the first time in the nation's 21-year trajectory on universal adult franchise.

This was a bigger achievement than had been secured anywhere in the world in that year of student-led tumult that had erupted in Paris and made its way pretty much around the world, often based, as in Pakistan's case, on local and relatively inconsequential complaints feeding into a broader, albeit seldom clearly articulated, agenda for change.

In Pakistan's case, the students who initially revolted had no clue about its consequences, as fellow students across the country joined in, as did disaffected segments of the intelligentsia and substantial proportions of the working class, not least in East Pakistan.

It took the generally more militant students in Dhaka about a month to cotton on to the fact that something unusual was afoot. A visit from Pakistan's dictator was instrumental in sparking protests that spread throughout the province — and ultimately, it could be argued, led to the creation of Bangladesh.

Meanwhile, in the western province — still a single unit at the time — there had been an assassination attempt on Ayub in Peshawar just a couple of days after the inauguration of the unrest in Rawalpindi.

The protests spread pretty quickly thereafter, not only to obvious cities such as Karachi and Lahore but also to much smaller towns, although the vast rural tracts were largely immune. Not so in East Pakistan, though, where peasant leader Maulana Bhashani was first among that wing's prominent political leaders to place himself in the vanguard of the resistance movement, calling strikes that were widely heeded.

There were significant strikes in West Pakistan too, which offered the students an inkling of what they had unleashed. In the past, a mixture of bribes and repression had sufficed to sustain the status quo. But something different was afoot as 1968 segued into 1969, and in February, Ayub announced his intention to withdraw from politics. He made way the following month for army chief Yahya Khan.

Yahya's reign, however short-lived, was ultimately a monumental disaster. He presided over Pakistan's first general elections based on universal adult franchise, and then refused to cede power to the majority party, instead unleashing an unprecedented campaign of state violence, in which Bhutto was decidedly complicit. Sadly, hardly any students in West Pakistan deemed the massacres of their counterparts and so many others in East Pakistan worth protesting about.

The subcontinent's second divide within a quarter-century accounted for hopeful new beginnings on both sides, but led to further bouts of military rule. In the case of the Pakistani rump, the period from July 1977 onwards proved to be the most atrocious segment of its trajectory, echoed in misguided agitators baying for the blood of an innocent woman — not to mention a government apparently willing to collude with the reprobates.

The rebels of '68 were broadly on the right track, although the democracy that followed left much to be desired, and dark shadows thereafter rapidly consumed its virtues and expanded on its shortcomings. The awakening led in due course to election results that rattled the status quo. The revolt wasn't the first or the last, but it deserves a loftier place in the nation's history than it has hitherto been deemed worthy of.

Mahir Ali

P.S.

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mahir.dawn gmail.com