
Upheaval in West and South Asia: Public Opinion in Pakistan

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The year 1979 was a time of great upheaval throughout Asia. Given the importance of the critical events of that year to Pakistan and the wider region, it is interesting to examine in retrospect how the Pakistani public at the time perceived them. This essay first sets the context for exploring these public attitudes. It then summarizes Pakistani opinion on major foreign policy and domestic issues, drawing upon the surveys carried out by the author under the auspices of the Pakistan Institute of Public Opinion, the Pakistani affiliate of the Gallup International Association during the year 1979.¹



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SETTING THE CONTEXT

Situated between West Asia and South Asia, Pakistan has become an active theater of conflict and convulsion. In hindsight, one could say that 1979 was the year when the seeds were sown for a globally active Islamist Pakistan. The new “Globalized Pakistan” positioned its foreign policy as staunchly anti-Soviet and its domestic policy as passionately Islamist.

The year 1979 was United States President Jimmy Carter’s last year in office. The Carter Administration was suspicious of the new, undemocratic military regime in Pakistan, which introduced a set of punishments (mostly against political activities) that blended British colonial penal practices with Islamic criminal law and accelerated Pakistan’s nuclear program.

Initially, the Pakistani military regime had to expend much effort to sell the Americans on its ability to become a “frontline” state against Soviet aggression. The American government appeared divided on whether to treat the expulsion of the last of the royal family in Afghanistan by a civilian Marxist leadership as a positive or a negative step, particularly when it had enjoyed close working relationship with at least some of the Afghan Marxists.

On the Pakistani domestic scene, the situation in 1979 was best captured by the April 5 hanging of former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.

1. All surveys were nationwide, conducted in both rural and urban areas of all four provinces of the country. The sample comprised nearly 1,700 adults from a cross-section of various age, income, education, and language backgrounds. At the end of the essay, the findings are presented in tabular form.

Views on the Iranian Revolution

In April 1979, Pakistani views on the Iranian Revolution were divided. The first and largest group (35%) of respondents believed that Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was better than his predecessor, Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi; a second group (25%) thought the Shah was better. The third group (30%) was still undecided (See Table 1.1). In later years, as the revolution consolidated, a larger majority tended to favor the revolution.

Among detractors of the revolution, there was considerable concern about the imposition of death penalties. When asked in a national poll, 40% opposed such punishment, 28% favored it, and 32% said they did not know (See Table 1.2).

Views on Afghanistan

This was the year when the avowedly Socialist/Marxist regime of Nur Muhammad Taraki and Hafizullah Amin ruled Afghanistan. They had overthrown the government of President Muhammad Daud Khan. Daud, Crown Prince and cousin of King Zahir Shah, had ruled Afghanistan since 1973 when he overthrew the king and abrogated monarchy. But the regime had remained largely intact.

Public opinion in Pakistan was opposed to the Tarakai-Amin government. When asked whether this government would last or collapse, 48% of a national sample in Pakistan believed it would quickly collapse. Only 8% thought it would last. Forty-four percent said they did not know (See Table 2.1). As for the Afghan refugees who had started to arrive in Pakistan in large numbers, 81% of the respondents believed they should be welcomed and helped, 10% opposed such an effort, and 9% did not give a view (See Table 2.2).

80% of Pakistanis named Saudi Arabia in an open-ended question which asked: “Which Muslim majority country (other than Pakistan itself) did they like the most.”

Views on Saudi Arabia and Muslim World Issues

Notwithstanding the political turmoil caused by the violent takeover of the Holy Mosque in Mecca in November 1979, 80% of Pakistanis named Saudi Arabia in an open-ended question which asked: “Which Muslim majority country (other than Pakistan itself) did they like the most.” The only other country that made the list was Libya at 3% (See Table 4.1).

This same year Egyptian President Anwar Sadat travelled to Jerusalem, breaking the boycott of relations with Israel. The

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Pakistanis surveyed largely opposed Sadat's move. When asked whether Sadat's initiative was in or against the interest of Muslims, only 11% supported the move, 44% opposed it, and 45% did not know (See Table 4.2).

Although the Saudi leadership was viewed with great respect in Pakistan, interestingly, in 1979, Colonel Mu'ammad Qadhafi was a close runner-up as most popular Muslim leader. He was seen as an outspoken leader who supported

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Pakistan's nuclear program and also as someone who had stood by the late Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in his last difficult days. In response to the question of who, among Muslim world leaders, did they most like, 55% of those surveyed identified the Saudi king (44% mentioned King Fahd, 10% mentioned the late King Faysal). Colonel Qadhafi was next at 34%. Yasir 'Arafat was third at 12%. A number of other leaders were mentioned at much lower levels of approval, such as King Husayn of Jordan (5%), Anwar Sadat of Egypt (4%), Hafiz al-Asad of Syria (4%), and Sultan Nahyan of the UAE (3%) (See Table 4.3).

Views on the United States

In the aftermath of General Zia ul-Haq's establishment of martial law and continued insistence on pursuing the nuclear program, the Carter Administration had terminated Pakistan's economic aid program and imposed a variety of sanctions on the country. Opinion was sought to gauge the level of resentment on this issue. Apparently, the views among the Pakistani public at the time were mixed. The respondents were asked: "Should the United States offer to resume its economic aid operations in Pakistan, should it [Pakistan] accept or reject such offer?" Fourth-six percent (46%) counselled acceptance, while 43% favored rejecting such as offer. The remaining 11% did not know (See Table 3.1).

However, a very large majority of those polled favored continuing the nuclear program, which was an important bone of contention between the US and Pakistan. Thus, when asked their views on whether Pakistan should proceed to acquire nuclear weapons, 90% of the respondents favored doing so, 6% opposed, and 4% said they did not know (See Table 3.2).

On the whole, Pakistanis appeared in 1979 to be latecomer adherents to the idea of non-alignment. In response to a polling question on this subject, 58% favored non-alignment in world politics, 22% favored choosing sides in the Cold War, and 20% said they did not know (See Table 3.3).

China was the nation most trusted or liked by those surveyed. Choosing among the United States, Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and China, 34% mentioned China as the country they regarded most favorably, as opposed to a mere 7% for the United States, 6% for France, and 2% for the Soviet Union. A large proportion of the sample, 47%, did not answer (See Table 3.4).

The Soviet Union at the time was seen as a close second to the United States as a global power. When asked about which of the two countries they considered more powerful, 33% ranked the United States on top, 22% placed the Soviet Union on top, and 16% believed they were an equal match. The remaining 29% did not answer (See Table 3.5).

PAKISTANI POPULAR OPINION — THE DOMESTIC SCENE

A new alignment of views whereby the Pakistani population was split between pro-Bhutto and anti-Bhutto opinions was forged in the years 1977-79. This alignment would come to dominate national politics in Pakistan for the next quarter of a century. It should therefore be of interest to read some facets of that opinion in 1979.

The Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), whose head, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, had been hung earlier in the year, was perceived by most Pakistanis as the likely winner if elections were held that year: 29% held that view, while just 16% viewed the Pakistan National Alliance (PNA) as the likely winner (See Table 5.1). The PNA had emerged as an alliance of anti-Bhutto political parties during the 1977 elections and a popular movement to remove Bhutto after the elections, which were seen as flawed by the opposition. However, many mentioned the PNA's component parties as the likely winners. None, though, exceeded 4%. In fact, by this time, the PNA had started to split apart; the answer to this question was a good indication of that split. The PNA constituted a mix of religious parties, Jamaat-e Islami, Jamaat-e Ulema-e Pakistan, and Jamaat ul-Ulema-e Islam, as well as the conservative Muslim League and small parties, the profile of whose voters and organizational structures was fairly similar to the Muslim League. Together this group had scored more votes than the Peoples Party in the 1970 Elections (PPP: 39%; three religious parties: 21%; Muslim League: 23%). In the 1977 elections and post-election protest movement, the PPP had been defeated due to its total isolation from the Islamists, traditionalists, and even the secular nationalist parties of the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) and Baluchistan.

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In 1979, while the PPP constituency was able to withstand pressure from the military and retain its voter base, the PNA began to break up. While the religious parties still held their voters through party discipline, the Muslim League became an empty shell, whose followers were either attracted to the PNA or became inactive. This decline of the Muslim League and rise of the religious parties in the anti-Bhutto constituency continued until about 1985. But 1979 can be seen as the year in which the Pakistan National Alliance disintegrated.

However, while the PNA disintegrated, the anti-Bhutto constituency did not. In fact, it was further consolidated. The divisive events of 1979, notably the execution of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and the suppression of PPP activists by the military government, deepened the cleavages between the two political tendencies of Pakistani politics. Bhuttoism never became

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an ideology, but it did turn into a political platform. It attracted a significant share of the Pakistani electorate — those who loved Bhutto and his legacy. But possibly a larger number aligned themselves in direct opposition to Bhuttoism. For the next ten years, until his death in a plane crash. General Zia ul-Haq rode the crest of the anti-Bhutto constituency.

CONCLUSION

The 1979 survey data help to capture the popular mood and attitudes of a period of great upheaval throughout West and South Asia and in Pakistan itself. The data not only record the public's views of critically important events occurring outside the country but also reveal 1979 as an important landmark in aligning Pakistani politics away from traditional cleavages to Bhuttoism as the defining political battle for years to come.

ON THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION

Table 1.1

Question: Is the new Government of Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran superior to the Shah's regime?

	Percent of Respondents
Superior	35%
Inferior	25%
Nothing can be said as yet	30%

Table 1.2

Question: Are the death penalties in Iran appropriate?

	Percent of Respondents
Yes	28%
No	40%
No Opinion	32%

ON AFGHANISTAN

Table 2.1

Question: In your view, will the present Afghan government continue or soon dissolve?

	Percent of Respondents
Continue	8%
Dissolve soon	48%
No opinion	44%

Table 2.2

Question: Should the Pakistani government assist the Afghan *Mujahidin*?

	Percent of Respondents
Should assist	81%
Should not assist	10%
No Opinion	9%

ON THE UNITED STATES

Table 3.1

Question: The US has stopped aid to Pakistan. If the US now desired to assist Pakistan again, should the latter accept this offer?

	Percent of Respondents
Accept	46%
Should not accept	43%
No Opinion	11%

Table 3.2

Question: Should Pakistan build an atom bomb?

	Percent of Respondents
Yes	90%
No	6%
No Opinion	4%

Table 3.3

Question: Should Pakistan remain non-aligned or associate with a superpower?

	Percent of Respondents
Should remain non-aligned	58%
Should remain associated with some superpower	22%
No Opinion	20%

Table 3.4

Question: Which country is most liked by you among the US, UK, USSR, China, and France?

	Percent of Respondents
China	34%
US	7%
UK	6%
USSR	2%
France	2%
No Opinion	47%

Table 3.5

Question: Which country is more powerful in your view: the USA or the USSR?

	Percent of Respondents
US	33%
USSR	22%
Equally strong	16%
No Opinion	29%

ON SAUDI ARABIA AND THE MUSLIM WORLD

Table 4.1

Question: Which country is most liked by you among the Muslim countries, in addition to Pakistan?

	Percent of Respondents
Saudi Arabia	80%
Libya	3%
Others	4%
UAE	1%
No Opinion	2%

Table 4.2

Question: In your view, is the accord arrived at between Egypt and Israel beneficial to Muslims or not?

	Percent of Respondents
Beneficial	11%
Not beneficial	44%
No Opinion	45%

Table 4.3

Question: Who are your most liked leaders among leaders of the Muslim countries?

	Percent of Respondents
Shah Fahd	44%
Shah Faysal	10%
Qadhafi	34%
Yasir 'Arafat	12%
King Husayn of Jordan	5%
Zia ul Haq	6%
Anwar Sadat	4%
Hafiz al-Asad	4%
Sultan Nayhan	3%

DOMESTIC SCENE

Table 5.1

Question: In your view, which party will succeed in national polls?

	Percent of Respondents
PPP	29%
PNA	16%
JUP	4%
JI	1%
ML	1%
IP	2%
None	10%
Different parties in different provinces	4%
Polls will not be held	3%
No Opinion	30%

Source: Pakistan Institute of Public Opinion (the Pakistani affiliate of the Gallup International Association), National Opinion Poll, 1979.