

The Politics of Pragmatism in Pakistan: A Case Study of the Pakistan People's Party

Muhammad Iqbal Chawla*
Aman Ullah**

ABSTRACT

The recent comeback of PPP on the national political scene has attracted the attention of many writers and historians to analyze this phenomenon. The PPP had suffered a decline following the 2013 elections and its support of the PML (N) for continuation of the democratic era in Pakistan. So its recent revival and re-emergence on the national scene in which it was a partner in toppling the Balochistan government and participated actively in the Senate elections of 2018 is being looked at closely by the political analysts and pundits. From here on it seems that the PPP might end up playing a frontline role in the 2018 elections

Therefore, this study attempts to understand the role of Pakistan People's Party, hereafter the PPP, in the political history of Pakistan. The underlying hypothesis of the study is that though in the era of Z. A. Bhutto (1967-1979) PPP might have been regarded as an ideological party but after its founder leader's death it adopted an approach of

* Dean, Faculty of Arts & Humanities, Chairman, Department of History & Pakistan Studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.

** Assistant Professor, University Law College, University of the Punjab, Lahore.

pragmatism. The PPP completed its fifty years in 2017 and since its initiation, it has either been the ruling or the main opposition party of the country. Since the party's initiation, the politics of Pakistan has revolved around it in one way or the other. Other than the Pakistan Muslim League (N) it has been the oldest surviving political party of the country and thus deserves to be researched further in detail in order to assess its contribution to the national political milieu. It has often been a popular party with a broad base among the masses and with charismatic leaders like Z.A. Bhutto and Benazir Bhutto, so naturally it has attracted numerous historians to explore and analyze its role in the political history of Pakistan. Much has already been written on the role of main leadership¹ of PPP in shape of biographies² and party history³ but hardly anyone has academically evaluated the role of PPP in a theoretical framework. Therefore, there is a dire need to throw fresh light on the PPP and in this paper the theory of pragmatism is applied to understand the approach PPP has adopted since 1979 to gain power and to retain its position as a main opposition party in the Pakistani politics.

Introduction

The term 'pragmatism' has been argued as an approach in politics and not as the philosophical movement that was started by the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce⁴ in the United States in the 1870s and subsequently developed by William James,⁵ John Dewey,⁶ George Herbert

1 Benazir Bhutto, *Daughter of Destiny* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999).

2 Libby Hughes, *Benazir Bhutto: From Prison to Prime Minister (People in Focus Book)* (Bloomington: Universe, 2000).

3 Benazir Bhutto, *Reconciliation: Islam, Democracy and the West* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2008).

4 Pragmatism is primarily a method of philosophy designed to 'make our ideas clear and to avoid confusion by referring our ideas to their practical effects. <https://www.the-philosophy.com/pragmatism>

5 If there is no practical difference on the effects of two different concepts then they refer to the same thing. Still, representatives of pragmatism have

Mead, Clarence Irving Lewis⁷ and others.⁸ Historically, pragmatism is rooted in the Greek word 'pragma' which means "thing, fact, matter or affair."⁹

Pragmatism: A Theoretical Framework

As stated above pragmatism is an approach in politics which is understood, interpreted and practiced by different politicians in a variety of ways. The following are some of the significant landscapes of political pragmatism. Firstly, politics means those policies and actions that politicians undertake to attain power in order to influence the public life of a society or a country and pragmatism implies the adoption of a "practical approach to problems and affairs."¹⁰ 'Practical' means that idea, method or action which is workable or is likely to be successful; therefore, it is noticed in Pakistan's history that politicians show "a kind of willingness to whatever works to reach the desired goal," it is called politics of pragmatism.¹¹ Secondly, pragmatic politicians are generally realists,¹² i.e., they accept the situation as it really is and do not pretend to be different. That is why not only such politicians are flexible but they also exhibit the freedom

developed a variety of designs, including the crucial concept of truth.
<https://www.the-philosophy.com/pragmatism>

6 Dewey's logic about pragmatism is actually a 'theory of inquiry'.
<https://www.the-philosophy.com/pragmatism>

7 He was follower of absolute pragmatism. William Tuthill Parry, "In Memoriam: Clarence Irving Lewis (1883-1964)", *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic Volume XI*, no. 2 (April 1970):129.

8 Other pragmatists' are Rorty, Putnam, Quine, Goodman (1950-2000).<https://www.the-philosophy.com/pragmatism>, *Academic American Encyclopaedia*, (New Jersey: Arete Publishing Company, Inc, 2000), 487.

9 William L Reese, *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion*, (New Jersey: Humanitarian Press, 2001), 453.

10 Henry, "The Politics of Pragmatism". Crooked Timber, December 12, 2008. Accessed December 5, 2014. <http://crookedtimber.org/2008/12/12/the-politics-of-pragmatism/>

11 Steven Ross, "Pragmatism, Philosophical and Political". The Brooklyn Rail, February 4, 2009. Accessed December 5, 2014. <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2009/02/express/pragmatism-philosophical-and-political>.

12 Ross, "Pragmatism, Philosophical and Political".

to revise their political course whenever and wherever necessary to achieve their objectives.¹³ This realism can be embarrassing and painful because it often requires change and compromise in one's stated political stance.¹⁴ So, why does the pragmatic politician choose such an arduous path? It is because he thinks that "politics is about the art of compromise. It is about finding ways forward which competing forces can agree on. It involves deal making to find the best possible accommodation of everyone's interest."¹⁵ Thirdly, pragmatic politics is indifferent to preconceived political divides of 'conservatism', 'liberalism', 'left' or 'right' and is primarily driven by the concern for "good consequences".¹⁶ What is 'good' is determined by the pragmatic politician and once that is determined then he is not afraid to assume any position to secure that goal. This point can be elaborated by quoting an example from the life of the American statesman Abraham Lincoln, who was well known for his pragmatism.¹⁷ Lincoln ended the institution of slavery but he was equally committed to saving the American Union. In August 1862 while explaining his position on these issues to a newspaper editor Horace Greeley, he wrote, "If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that."¹⁸ Pragmatists reject the notion that people have a definite nature or ideas

13 Ross, "Pragmatism, Philosophical and Political".

14 Tim Hartford, "In Praise of Pragmatism". *The Independent*, June 7, 2011. Accessed December 5, 2014. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/in-praise-of-pragmatism-2293820.html>

15 Lindy Edwards, "Why Rudd Will Rue His Pragmatism". *The Sydney Morning Herald*, September 5, 2013. Accessed December 5, 2014. <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/why-rudd-will-rue-his-pragmatism-20130905-2t74h.html>

16 Ross, "Pragmatism, Philosophical and Political".

17 J. Saxton, "On Lincoln's Pragmatism," *American Political Thought*, 2, no. 1 (2013): 91.

18 Christopher Hayes, "The Pragmatist". *The Nation*, December 10, 2008. Accessed December 5, 2014. <http://www.thenation.com/article/pragmatist>

which can be absolute. Pragmatism is the opposite of dogmatism and idealism. While the idealist trusts a theory, the pragmatist relies on evidence. While the dogmatist upholds an overarching narrative and searches for what fits over his pre-conceptions, the pragmatist looks at the specifics of the situation and prefers to test his ideas and changes direction if necessary.¹⁹ For an idealist, principle is everything whereas a pragmatist discards every principle and adapts to the circumstances to lay hand on political power.²⁰ While the idealists religiously stick to fixed principles, the pragmatists' chief concern is to get the desired results and in the process they adapt themselves to the changing situation and do not abstain from anything to achieve their ends.²¹ To them, the ends justify the means.

A General Survey of Pragmatic Politics of PPP, 1967-2018

Before we throw some light on the above-mentioned hypothesis it is imperative to gauge into the political history of Pakistan since the foundation of Pakistan People's Party in 1967. Z.A. Bhutto's government was toppled in 1977 by Zia-ul-Haq, a military general and Bhutto was hanged in 1979 and as a result the PPP was pushed into the periphery of Pakistani politics.²² The PPP struggled hard for the restoration of democracy and regaining political power in 1988. General Zia's military rule continued from 1977 to 1988. Because of numerous political pressures on his regime, especially the PPP's Movement for Restoration of Democracy, Zia was forced to restore democracy though a controlled one. In this regard, the General Elections of 1985

19 Hartford, "In Praise of Pragmatism".

20 Peter Paris, "Core Beliefs and Pragmatism in Obama's Politics". Tikkun, October 25, 2012. Accessed December 5, 2014.
<http://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/core-beliefs-and-pragmatism-in-obamas-politics>

21 Seymour Martin Lipset (ed.), "The Encyclopaedia of Democracy", Vol.III, (London: Rutledge, 2002), 993.

22 Stanley Wolpert, *Zulfi Bhutto of Pakistan: His Life and Times* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2008), 481.

were held on a non-party basis and a majority of the candidates who won the elections joined the Muslim League. Zia nominated Mohammad Khan Junejo to be the Prime Minister of Pakistan but he dismissed the Junejo Government on May 29, 1988 as he could not even allow a weak person to challenge authoritarianism and work towards restoration of democracy. Zia announced the date of new general elections but he died soon after in a plane crash on August 16, 1988. By this time, Benazir had returned home from her self-imposed exile and contested the General Elections of 1988, held after Zia's death, and formed the government of PPP in the center.²³ The conflict between the PPP and the Muslim League (N) started from 1988 and became one of the reasons for the dismissal of both the Benazir and the Nawaz governments in the 1990s which led to the derailment of democracy.²⁴

In fact bad blood was created between the PPP and the Islami Jamhoory Ittihad (IJI), of which the PML (N) was a member, in the elections of 1988 and both were equally responsible for maintaining a policy of confrontation that continued for long time.²⁵ If the PPP tried to create obstacles in the path of Nawaz Sharif in forming his government in the Punjab, the IJI sought backdoor-channels-help from the president and the establishment to destabilize the PPP government in the center. During the course of later events, Nawaz Sharif was able to disassemble the PPP-led coalition which included the MQM and ANP, to win elections in 1990.²⁶

First term of Benazir as a Prime Minister was marked with ineffectiveness, corruption and political immaturity which

23 Maj. Gen. (Retd.) Rahat Latif, *Plus Bhutto's Episode: An Autobiography* (Lahore: Jang Publishers, 1993), 329.

24 S. M. Bashir, *Muslim League 1906 Se 1992 Tak* (Lahore: Pak Publishers, 1993).

25 Hamid Khan, *Constitutional and Political History of Pakistan* (Karachi: OUP), 2009.

26 Ian Preston, *A Political Chronology of Central, South and East Asia* (Psychology Press, 2001), 224-25.

helped Nawaz Sharif to once again manipulate the PPP's government.²⁷ Moreover, Nawaz Sharif had garnered enough support from the establishment and was also in the good books of President. When Benazir initiated the policy of confrontation against the IJI, especially Nawaz Sharif, she actually stirred up a hornet's nest. In the 1990s both the PPP and the PML (N) enjoyed roles as the ruling party and the opposition respectively by cheating²⁸ and outwitting each other and did not refrain from using undemocratic and underhand tactics.²⁹ But the hallmark of this conflict was that democracy was weakened and subsequently paved the way for military dictatorship in 1999 because of their vested interests and pragmatic approach.³⁰ Finally, the PPP and the PML (N) agreed to a Charter of Democracy (CoD) in 2006 which helped both the leaders of Pakistan, Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, to come back to Pakistan and become a part once again of mainstream politics. Benazir's murder in 2007 paved the way for Asif Ali Zardari and Bilawal Bhutto to assume the joint role of co-chairmen of the PPP. Since then they are playing key role in party's policies. Zardari quite skilfully used the Charter of Democracy to complete the PPP's tenure from 2008 to 2013 thanks to the friendly opposition of PML (N) who also honoured the principle of COD. Zardari in return also remained friendly with the PMLN for almost 4 years but because of number of factors Zardari got offended and thus again seems on grabbing power by ignoring the principle of COD.

The historical survey reveals that it is important to study history of PPP from the hanging of Z. A. Bhutto in 1979 to date because the PPP has come to power three times and it was successful in completing its first five-year tenure in

27 Peter R. Blood, ed., *Pakistan: A Country Study* (Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1995).

28 Salim Younis, *Siasi Itehad Aur Pakistani Siasat per Asraat* (Lahore: Jamhori Publications, 1993).

29 Lawrence Ziring, *Pakistan in the Twentieth Century: A Political History* (Karachi, Oxford University Press, 1997).

30 Safdar Mahmood, *Pakistan: Political Roots and Development 1947-1999*, (Karachi: Oxford University Press), 2002.

government in 2013 and then working as the main opposition party upto 2018. Therefore, the history of PPP can be the best case study for re-evaluation of the political history of Pakistan. It is one of the country's largest political parties and it was the first mainstream party which introduced the culture of mass-based politics in the country's western wing. Apart from the Pakistan Muslim League and one or two religio-political parties, it is the longest surviving political party at the national level. The importance of this party can be understood from the fact that overall, it has ruled Pakistan on four occasions whereas during the period under study it was in power at three different times (1988-90, 1993-96 and 2008-13) and is one of the major opposition parties along with Pakistan Tehrik-i-Insaf (PTI). If not in power, it acted as a major power broker at the national and provincial levels by being the leading party in the opposition to the governments of the day. Pakistan is a federation and therefore, the politics in the federating units is equally important. Till 2018, the PPP has been the ruling party, a coalition partner or the opposition party at different occasions in each of the four federating units of the state. This indicates its overall political presence in the country's political scene. The results of the 2013 General Elections showed that the PPP was losing its political clout at both the federal and the provincial levels. For the first time, it looked as if the PPP was being downsized at the provincial level. It is still the major ruling coalition partner in the province of Sindh and an opposition party at the national level yet it was able to regain status of significant opposition party. Moreover, it had no representation in the legislature of Baluchistan province and has marginalized presence in the provincial assemblies of the Punjab and Khyber Pukhtunkhwa (KP). The PPP, somehow, has made a comeback recently in Balochistan and made inroads in the recent senate election (2018) and thus is regaining its lost stature. Nonetheless it cannot be denied that the politics of Pakistan nearly forty year's span (1979 to 2018) cannot be discussed without the PPP figuring into it. Pakistan being a federation and the PPP having representation in all the

federating units, it is useful to study the significance of its politics for the people and the country. The present author maintains that the PPP adopted a pragmatic approach towards political matters and thus has remained in power or as potential opposition, thus played key role in decision making at national and provincial level.

PPP's Pragmatism: An Analysis, 1979 to 2018

Keeping in view above mentioned discussion we can understand the politicians and political parties of Pakistan the theory of pragmatism and this paper has selected the PPP as a case study. During the period under study from 1979 to 2018, one can identify several aspects of pragmatic politics practiced by the PPP. Like any other political party, the ultimate objective of the PPP after the overthrow and subsequent hanging of its chairman Z. A. Bhutto by the then President General Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq was to gain political power. The party tried to destabilize the Zia government on its own through agitation, however, it realized it could not. When the party's top leader Benazir Bhutto returned to Pakistan from the US in 1986, it avowedly adopted a pragmatic stance, i.e., the politics of agitation was considered harmful to the country because it could lead to another Martial Law. This did not mean that the party did not build pressure against Zia; in fact, it went to a higher level through a protest movement such as the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD)³¹ in 1981 but not to the extent where another military intervention could become a possibility. Even becoming a constituent party of the MRD was in itself a pragmatic move because some of the parties³² in it were the ones that had played an active role in the

31 It was spearheaded by the Pakistan People's Party led by Shaheed Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto to force Zia to call for elections. Nadir Nabil Gabol, "Nothing Grand about Grand Alliance", October 27, 2017, <https://dailytimes.com.pk/130783/nothing-grand-grand-democratic-alliance/>

32 MRD was an alliance of nine political parties i.e., JUI, NAP, Muslim League, Qoumi Mahaz Azadi, Mazdour Kassar Party, PPP, Jamaat-i-Islami. Abdul Qadir Mushtaq, Movement for Restoration of Democracy (MRD), *Research Society of Pakistan* 52, no.1 (Jan-Jun 2015):113.

protest movement launched by the Pakistan National Alliance (PNA 1977)³³, the opposition alliance that overthrew the Z. A. Bhutto government in 1977. Despite this, the PPP became a part of the MRD to oust Zia from power in 1988. However, Benazir Bhutto chose to become first lady Prime Minister of Pakistan and of the Muslim world in 1988 after on certain terms and condition including certain persons and policies would be continued in her term of office.

The PPP adopted a much more pragmatic approach against the government of General Pervez Musharraf (1999-2008). Although the party did remain an active member of the political alliances against Musharraf such as the Grand Democratic Alliance (GDA) and the Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy (ARD) it refrained from launching any agitation. On the contrary it exhibited several pragmatic postures towards the government. Initially, it declared its willingness to cooperate with the military regime.³⁴ Later on, it increased the pressure on his government by demanding the dissolution of the Legislative Assemblies.³⁵ When that did not work, the party showed its readiness to contest general elections under the same President.³⁶ Moreover, at one point in time, the party rejected the possibility of cutting any deal with the military ruler but subsequently not only did it hammer out an accord in the form of the National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO)³⁷ it also refused to impeach President Musharraf, when the party came back into power in 2008.³⁸

33 Gabol, Nothing Grand about Grand Alliance.

34 *Daily Nawa-i-Waqt*, Lahore, October 18 1999.<https://dailytimes.com.pk/130783/nothing-grand-grand-democratic-alliance/>

35 *Daily The Nation*, Lahore, August 5, 2004.

36 *Daily Times*, Lahore, December 28, 2006.

37 The National Reconciliation Ordinance(NRO) was issued by the former President of Pakistan General (retd) Pervez Musharraf on October 5, 2007.Asad J. Rizvi, *Loud Thinking*(FP Publications (Pvt.) Ltd., 2011), 115.

38 *Daily Jang*, Lahore, February 24, 2008.

The PPP followed quite a different strategy as an opposition party against the civilian governments of Mian Nawaz Sharif in the 1990s. Overall, its politics boiled down to the ouster of Nawaz Sharif's Government in 1999 even if it had to resort to the politics of agitation,³⁹ hence the long marches and the train marches. However, it adopted a pragmatic approach towards the Pakistan Muslim League (PML Nawaz League) in the post-Musharraf period, courtesy the "Charter of Democracy" signed by the two parties.⁴⁰

Pragmatists do not bind themselves to any idealism because by being political realists they believe in "what works" in a given situation. That is why the PPP co-chairman Asif Ali Zardari is on the record to have said that accords are not the Holy Quran or hadith⁴¹ in spite of the power-sharing formula signed with Nawaz Sharif under the Murree Declaration⁴² some time ago.⁴³ The PPP did trim its stances here and there and practiced pragmatic politics during its last tenure in the central government (2008-13)⁴⁴ to the extent that while it had unsuccessfully tried to dislodge the provincial government of the PML in the Punjab in 1989 it made no such serious effort against the PML Punjab provincial government in its last tenure. This was despite the fact that the PPP had serious reservations over the power-sharing arrangements in the Punjab province with its senior coalition partner, the PML-N.⁴⁵

Somewhat similar pragmatism was visible in the PPP's stance with regard to economy and industry. Just before the 1988 General Elections, the PPP promised that there would

39 Daily *The News*, Lahore, August 16, 1997.

40 Daily *The Nation*, Lahore, January 11, 2005.

41 *Daily Times*, Lahore, August 24, 2004.

42 Muhammad Iqbal Chawla, "Era of 'Reconciliation' in Pakistan, 2006-2017: A Critical Reappraisal," *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan* 54, no. 2 (Jul-Dec 2017): 243.

43 Daily *The Nation*, Lahore, March 10, 2008.

44 Stephen P. Cohen, ed., *Future of Pakistan* (Washington DC.: Brookings Institution Press, 2011), 164.

45 Daily *The Nation*, Lahore, January 25, 2008.

be no nationalization of industry if it came into power⁴⁶ yet once it was sacked from power; its Chairperson Benazir Bhutto declared that her party would nationalize industries⁴⁷ and banks.⁴⁸ In other words, the party did adopt contradictory positions as and when these suited its political strategy. An inherent conflict could also be discerned in the competing claims of those who felt that the party stood for the have-nots and those who thought that the haves could also lay claim on it. When the party was out of power, its businessman secretary general, Ahmad Mukhtar, stated that the PPP would bring forward the capitalists and industrialists⁴⁹ whereas on one hand the party's Punjab President Qasim Zia claimed that the PPP was a representative of the working class.⁵⁰ This is worth noting that at the same time the president of its Cultural Wing, Fakhar Zaman, stressed upon the central leadership "to purge the PPP's Central Executive Committee of the capitalists and the feudal."⁵¹

To make things work towards certain political ends is a difficult task but pragmatists take up this challenge. In the process, they adapt to difficult situations and when the going gets tough they take chances by seizing upon the available opportunities; neither do they shirk from compromises or experimentation nor are they afraid to offer out of the box solutions in the blind alleys or dead ends of politics.

Conclusion

This study, by penning the PPP's history from the hanging of Z. A. Bhutto in 1979 to 2018, has shown that the PPP, including its three terms in power and its successful completion of its first five-year tenure in government in 2013 and after that has been working as main opposition party to

46 Daily *The Nation*, Lahore, July 15, 1988.

47 Daily *The Frontier Post*, Lahore, May 27, 1991.

48 Daily *Dawn*, Karachi, June 5, 1991.

49 Daily *Pakistan*, Lahore, April 9, 1997.

50 Daily *The Nation*, Lahore, January 5, 2003.

51 Daily *The News*, Lahore, July 9, 1998.

date. Pakistan is a federation and therefore, the politics in the federating units is equally important. Till 2018, the PPP has been the ruling party, a coalition partner or the opposition party in each of the four federating units of the state. This indicates its overall political presence in the country's political scene. The results of the 2013 General Elections showed that the PPP was losing its political clout at both the federal and the provincial levels. Moreover, it had no representation in the legislature of Baluchistan province and has marginalized presence in the Provincial Assemblies of the Punjab and Khyber Pukhtunkhwa (KP). The PPP, somehow has made come back recently in Balochistan Government and made inroads in the recent Senate election (2018) and thus is regaining its lost stature nonetheless it cannot be denied that the politics of Pakistan nearly forty year's span (1979 to 2018) cannot be discussed without PPP figuring into it.

In short, the PPP has been one of the major actors in the political history of Pakistan. There were many factors that contributed to its popularity such as its two great and charismatic leaders, Z.A. Bhutto and Benazir Bhutto but it adopted the policy of pragmatism that helped it to regain power one way or the other. It used many tools to retain its vitality and relevance in national and provincial politics. It opted to form coalition governments in the centre and provinces when it came into power, made alliances and signed agreements like CoD while in Opposition. By 2013, the PML (N) had come to dominate national politics whereas the PPP generally remained friendly opposition so that it claimed that it believed in the continuation of democracy and would not dishonour the principle of CoD but quite recently it changed its mind and working against the PMLN and this might de-track democracy. The PPP adopted pragmatic approach towards political matters and thus remained in power or as potential opposition and that's why has played a key role in decision making at national and provincial level. Again, it has played a decisive role in the recent change over in the Balochistan Government and Senate elections in 2018

by adopting pragmatic approach. This has enabled it and all those political elements which are anti-PML (N) to bring about those monumental political changes at provincial elections and national level and it is expected that anti-PML (N) elements will work together to bring main changes in the General Elections of 2018.