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Pakistan

Long March to Victory

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Long March, identified globally with Mao, initiated last week in Pakistan transformed country's political landscape in a matter of five days. Unlike Mao's adventurous escapade amid wildernesses, the Long March spearheaded by Pakistan's legal fraternity was a mass urban uprising that finally forced the late Bhutto's ruling Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) to reinstate Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry, deposed by former military ruler General Pervez Musharraf on 3 November 2007.

It all began on March 9, back in 2007, when General Pervez Musharraf 'suspended' Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry on concocted charges. In fact, Iftikhar Chaudhry was summoned to Army House and was asked to resign. Certain radical decisions by Iftikhar Chaudhry had indeed annoyed the military junta ruling the country since 1999. Pakistan's pliant judiciary has always served the all-powerful military rulers since 1958, when first military rule was imposed. All the four military rulers, on assuming power (in 1958, 1969, 1977 and 1999) were legitimised by country's Supreme Court. Corrupt and docile, Pakistan's judiciary had no credibility left. All of a sudden, Iftikhar Chaudhry, appointed as Chief Justice in 2005, surprised the whole country when he suspended privatisation of Pakistan Steel Mills (PSM) on the plea of PSM workers' union. It did not merely embarrass the government but jeopardised the whole privatisation process too. He further surprised when he took suo motto actions on a government-sponsored real estate project. The 'New Murre' housing project was an environmental catastrophe. Despite protests by the civil society and environmental groups, the military government refused to budge since many top politicians and some generals had a stake in this real-estate venture. Iftikhar Chaudhry ordered to shelve this project. He started earning respect for his 'judicial activism'. He took suo motto actions on human rights, women rights cases besides offering relief to trade unions in some cases.

However, he became intolerable for military rulers when he publicly stated that General Musharraf could not continue both as president and army chief beyond 2007. Musharraf had plans to get another five-year mandate through Supreme Court as his predecessors had done and he himself did on assuming power.

Another sensitive issue was disappeared activists from Baluchistan province. A civil war has caught hold of Baluchistan since 1999. Hundreds of nationalist activists, including journalists and poets, have disappeared. When Human Rights Commission of Pakistan moved the Supreme Court against these disappearances, Iftikhar Chaudhry accepted the plea. The military regime was trying to hush up grave human rights violations (shootings, torture, and kidnappings) in Baluchistan committed by men-in-khakis to crush the Baloch insurgency. 'Enough is enough', thought Musharraf and summoned Iftikhar to Army House. Iftikhar Chaudhry's resignation was demanded. To Musharraf's shock, Iftikhar Chaudhry refused to resign despite threats. An angry Musharraf suspended him. Iftikhar Chaudhry had surprised Pakistan and embarrassed Musharraf yet again.

More surprises (and embarrassments for Musharraf) were to follow. The lawyers fraternity, demanding Iftikhar's reinstatement, stood up in protest across Pakistan. As they took to streets on March 16, the regime resorted to violence. Demonstrations were brutally baton-charged and tear-gassed while widely-watched TV channel Geo was attacked by state police for covering live the police violence. Violence did not work. Instead, a number of political parties now joined the demonstrations across the ideological divide: religious right to far left. As the demonstrations grew, the movement picked up a broader agenda. Now demand was not merely the reinstatement of Iftikhar Chaudhry but the restoration of democracy. The Bar Councils (advocates' associations), that have always been in the forefront of democratic movement, from across the country started inviting Iftikhar Chaudhry for an address. Activists in their thousands welcomed him as he travelled to Peshawar, capital of Frontier province. This was the first show that established Iftikhar's mass popularity.

But on 4 May 2007, Pakistan was witnessing a glimpse of revolution if not the revolution itself. The rallying point was of course Iftikhar Chaudhry. As he headed towards Lahore from capital Islamabad, millions lined 250 km-long-highway all the way to catch a glimpse of Iftikhar Chaudhry. An otherwise four-hour journey took 24 hours. Such a spontaneous mass mobilisation was unprecedented since 1968-days. A judge as a resistance symbol scared US-sponsored military regime. Khakis resorted to age-old response: thug violence was employed as Iftikhar Chaudhry arrived Karachi on May 12. Thirty-seven fell to bullets, 300 were shot injured and scores were brutally beaten up by ethno-fascist MQM-activists patronised by military regime. MQM is a Karachi-based party, was an ally of General Musharraf, now a PPP-coalition partner.

The Karachi massacre did not scare the ordinary Pakistanis who again turned up in their hundred thousands every time Iftikhar Chaudhry stepped out of Islamabad. Analysts began mentioning the year-68 when a mass movement humbled country's first military dictator, General Ayub Khan.

However, unlike US-sponsored Velvet/Purple/Cider revolutions, Pakistani judicial Intifada was indigenous, spontaneous and above all directed against a US-sponsored military dictator.

As General Musharraf handed Pakistan's military bases over to US forces in the wake of 9/11, he was showered upon military and economic aid. A regime that received US aid worth \$9.1 million in three years (1999-2001), was granted \$ 4.2 billion in next three years (an increase by 45,000 %). To assist Bush in his 'war on terror', Musharraf deployed 80,000 troops on Afghan border. But his pro-US policies were extremely unpopular domestically. As reward for his support, Washington not merely blessed him with financial grants but also over looked his election fraud (meantime shedding tears for Zimbabwe), violations of human rights in Baluchistan and curbs on media. However, it was not merely Musharraf's pro-imperialist policies but the grind of daily life that drove ordinary Pakistanis to streets. During his seven- year-rule, privatisation had rendered half a million jobless while prices had shot 100-200 % up. Lavish US aid had benefited either military elite or pro-military politicians. Life for ordinary folks became even miserable. Hence, the chief justice was mere a pretext, causes for the movement were much deeper.

Musharraf was forced to restore Iftikhar Chaudhry on 20 July,2007. Meantime, Musharraf's presidential term had expired. He got himself 're-elected' through unconstitutional means with the connivance of the late Benazir Bhutto whose PPP was second largest party in the than parliament. In return for Benazir Bhutto's support, Musharraf granted her and her husband, Asif Zardari, an amnesty under a presidential order called National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO). Both were facing corruption cases. Also, Asif Zardari was released from jail while Benazir was allowed to return.

Musharraf's re-election, though approved by his friends at White House, was illegal and unconstitutional. It was challenged in the court. Fearing that Supreme Court, headed by restored Iftikhar Chaudhry, might go against him, Musharraf declared Emergency on 3 November 2007. Besides suspending Iftikhar Chaudhry, eight more Supreme Court judges were removed. It led to protest-resignations by 60 Supreme Court and High Court judges besides angry demonstration across the country. Even Pakistani diaspora, from Australia to North America, staged demonstrations.

A month ahead of Emergency, Benazir Bhutto, after having struck a deal with Musharraf, returned from exile. The deal was brokered by the USA. The US plan was to assign Benazir Bhutto the slot of prime ministership so that she could mobilise support for an otherwise unpopular 'war on terror' while Musharraf was supposed to conduct the military operation against 'terrorists' even ruthlessly.

Benazir Bhutto was murdered on 27 December, 2007 leading to a five-day general strike in Pakistan. Musharraf would have been lynched had Condoleeza Rice not given a call to widower Bhutto, ordering him to co-operate with Musharraf and participate in the general elections that Musharraf was forced to hold in view of the growing democracy movement.

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The outcome of the general elections held on February 18, 2008 was nothing less than a ballot-box coup against a military dictator. The pro-Musharraf PML-Q badly lost. A four-party coalition, headed by Benazir Bhutto's PPP formed the government in the wake of elections. The new government was threatened by Bush-administration time and again to keep co-operating with Musharraf as he was still the US guy in Pakistan. The PPP, having given up its traditions of resistance since long, slavishly obeyed the US commands. But it annoyed the masses who wanted the chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry back at the helm of Supreme Court while Musharraf out of presidency.

The lawyers decided to take to streets yet again. In June 2008, they started a Long March to Islamabad and millions joined them from Karachi to Islamabad. Almost half-a-million Long Marchers reached in front of federal parliament building. But the advocates' leadership wavered and did not stage the sit-in.

The demand was restoration of Iftikhar Chaudhry as well as resignation by General Musharraf.

Musharraf in a nationally televised speech on 18 August 2008 announced to step down. In his place, Asif Zardari got himself elected. The president in Pakistan is elected by federal parliament and four provincial assemblies. The widower Bhutto was now occupying Presidency while PPP was ruling two of the four provinces, Sindh and Baluchistan In other two, Punjab and Frontier, PPP was part of the ruling coalition. Having secured all seats of power, President Zardari backed down from his promise to restore the impeached judges. He feared that fiercely independent Iftikhar Chaudhry, on his reinstatement, might put him in trouble since Iftikhar when he was temporarily restored by Musharraf, had accepted a plea against NRO granting Zardari an impunity from corruption cases.

The PPP's coalition partner, Nawaz Sharif's Muslim League, quit the coalition in protest as it was the party that had contested election on the promise of restoring the deposed judges.

Meantime, highly unpopular economic policies by the new the PPP-led government made the PPP lose popularity at a lightning speed.

The first Long March benefited only Asif Zardari, masses felt heated. It led to amass disillusionment, at least temporarily. However, the 12,00,000-strong advocates' community did not give up. It kept the flame alive. Since PPP was mere a democratic continuation of Musharraf's domestic and foreign policies, it started losing popularity on the right and left. The lawyers movement began picking steam yet again and to mark the second anniversary of Iftikhar Chaudhry's removal, they announced another Long March on Islamabad and a sit-in 'until Iftikhar Chaudhry's restoration'.

To be kicked off in port city of Karachi, south of Pakistan, the Long March was supposed to culminate in an indefinite mass sit-in---scheduled for March 16--- in front of federal parliament building at Islamabad, north of Pakistan.

The PPP government attempted in vain to suppress Long March using anti-democratic measures akin to those employed by General Musharraf during his last months in power. The PPP-government invoked draconian section 144, dating back to the British colonial regime, to impose a nationwide ban on demonstrations and processions.

On March 11, a day ahead of planned Long March, police arrested thousands of activists and lawyers. Baton-wielding police attacked Long Marchers in Karachi and arrested scores more as they gathered to begin their march. All the highways leading to Islamabad were sealed while major town were fortified in a bid to stop Long Marchers from proceeding to Islamabad.

The government's information minister Sherry Rehman resigned after the government attempted to block

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transmissions of the private TV channels broadcasting the Long March live. Even some police officers tendered their resignation rather than continue to repress the popular movement.

The mass resistance triumphed after a massive showdown in the streets of Lahore on March 16. Home-town of Nawaz Sharif, a former prime minister heading his own faction of right-wing Muslim League, Lahore is country's second largest town and capital of Punjab province. Nawaz Sharif's Muslim League was ruling Punjab until February 25. The provincial government was headed by Nawaz Sharif's younger brother, Shahbaz Sharif.

Fearing that Punjab government, being sympathetic to advocates movement, might lend the Long Marchers a helping hand, President Zardari through Supreme Court---- packed with his loyal judges---- got Nawaz Sharif and Shahbaz Sharif disqualified. On the pretext that Shahbaz was disqualified to head Punjab government, he was dislodged as chief minister of Punjab. Instead of treading the constitutional path of allowing the Punjab Assembly to elect new chief minister, President Zardari imposed direct federal rule in Punjab. He had hoped to buy off few dozen parliamentarians in Punjab Assembly and form a PPP government. It did not happen. Still, owing to direct federal rule, he could call the shots in Punjab. He had hoped to foil Long March, that had to pass through Punjab to reach Islamabad, by unleashing a rein of terror.

His repressive measures did produce results in Sindh. However, when Long Marchers reached Lahore, a rebellious city of about eight millions dashed all Zardari's hopes. The residents of Lahore fought day-long pitched battles on March 15. Matters climaxed as Nawaz Sharif defied a detention order confining him to his residence in Lahore, and headed a motorcade towards the city centre where thousands of charged up activists had already converged.

As the momentum gathered the police escaped while protesters removed the buses blocking the roads. By the evening of March 15, a mass of Long Marchers, led by Nawaz Sharif and advocates' leaders, was heading for Islamabad.

The mass rebellion in Lahore propelled a high-level meeting at presidency. Asif Zardari was joined by Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani and military boss, General Ishfaq Kiani. The US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton and her British counterpart, David Milliband were also busy calling Asif Zardari and Nawaz Sharif. In the wee hours of March 16, Prime Minister Gilani was addressing the nation on television. He announce to restore Iftikhar Chaudhry as Chief Justice.

He also announced that his government would file a review petition in the Supreme Court against the disqualification from elected office of Nawaz Sharif and his younger brother Shahbaz Sharif.

Gilani's televised speech led to celebrations in city streets across Pakistan. Lawyers and activists were seen dancing to drum beats and distributing sweets as Nawaz Sharif and advocates' leadership called off the Long March. A two-year-long mass movement had won an unprecedented victory.