My political struggle

By

M. Asghar Khan

The movement continued at a hectic pace until Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was released and my reason for entering this field had been met. In this process, however, I had had close association with a large number of political activists and political workers who had voluntarily joined me in working for a common cause, without any guidance or help. Ayub Khan was still in the saddle, and apart from Bhutto's release, nothing else had changed. Mujibur Rehman of the Awami had been arrested in East Pakistan on charges of conspiring against the state. There was resentment in East Pakistan also against the policy of discrimination against the Bengalis. Ayub Khan ignored this and continued his policy of suppression of the people.

As a measure of protest against the repressive policies of the government, I renounced my awards of Hilal-e-Pakistan and Hilal-e-Quaid-i-Azam. In March 1969 Ayub Khan called the Round Table Conference of political leaders in Rawalpindi. Mujibur Rehman, who was in jail, was not invited. Since he represented the sentiments of the people of East Pakistan, there was little point in holding a conference without him and the political leaders of West Pakistan insisted on his presence. This point was eventually conceded and Mujibur Rehman was released and invited. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Maulana Bhashani of East Pakistan, who had been invited, refused to attend. Bhutto told me that Bhashani had advised him not to attend as they would in any case benefit from any concessions that the conference may be able to extract from Ayub Khan. I was invited to attend and did so.

At the opening day of the conference Vice Admiral A R Khan, Ayub Khan's Defence Minister, issued a statement to the press accusing me of working for foreign powers and against the interests of Pakistan. I objected to this and withdrew from the conference. The Minister of Information, Khawaja Shahabuddin, apologized on behalf of the government, and the conference proceeded to a satisfactory conclusion. The RTC lasted three days and Ayub Khan agreed to hold general elections on the basis of 'one man one vote.' On the question of the six points of Sheikh Mujib Ur Rehman, he said that he would leave this to the newly elected assembly to decide. Every one was satisfied and the round table conference ended on a successful note. The newly elected National Assembly was to decide the question of Mujib Ur Rehman's six points, and the future of the 'one unit.' Ayub Khan announced his decision to hand over power to anyone the National Assembly elected, to replace him. The conference proceeded smoothly and Ayub Khan conceded to all the demands of the opposition. A way had been found to end the deadlock and to make a new beginning on the road to democracy.

All this time, General Yahya Khan, the commander-in-chief of the army, who had been close to Ayub Khan since he was a brigadier and was also the one who had done all the planning for Ayub Khan's take-over in 1958, was waiting for an opportunity to replace his benefactor. When there were some demonstrations against the government in Punjab - engineered by the Military and Civil intelligences; the latter also under Yahya Khan's control through his brother who was the Head of the Civil Intelligence, Ayub Khan held a conference and decided to impose Martial Law in certain cities. Altaf Gauhar, Information Secretary at the time, in his book, "Ayub Khan - Pakistan's First Military Ruler," gives an authentic account of how Ayub Khan was replaced by Yahya Khan. He writes:

"Ayub Khan asked the Information Secretary to prepare his farewell speech and the letter he should write to Yahya. It would not be a letter of resignation because he would only step aside and proceed on a three months' leave. He gave no indication of the arrangements he had made with Yahya about his own future."

Ayub studied with great care his abdication speech and letter to Yahya. He made a few changes and added one or two new points. He then took up a file which was lying beside him and pulling out a paper said to the Information Secretary, "Here are the guidelines I have given to Yahya." According to the guidelines Yahya, after taking over, would arrest all the agitators and some of the more irresponsible political leaders and restore law and order and take steps to revive the economic life. Ayub put down the file and said, "He will carry out my orders. He has promised to sort out Bhutto, though I think Asghar Khan is more dangerous than him."

It was clear that Yahya had led Ayub to believe that the army would put down the agitation and eliminate his political opponents and put him back in power after three months. Ayub accepted the gambit because it offered him a ray of hope in the darkness of failure and despair. A pragmatic and hard-headed person, Ayub was now a prisoner of fears and a victim of delusions. He was still ruminating when the ADC announced the arrival of Yahya Khan. They remained together for sometime and after Yahya left, Ayub said, "The poor man was crying at the thought of his Supreme Commander leaving in such painful circumstances."
Actually, Yahya had come to see the text of Ayub's broadcast before it was recorded and the letter before it was signed and dispatched. Yahya had constructed his plan with great care and like all conspirators, he was extremely nervous that if one brick happened to fall out of place the whole facade would come crumbling down.

This is an excerpt from the writer's book "My Political Struggle" published by Oxford University Press. He is a retired air chief and a veteran politician.

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My Political Struggle 1st Edition. by M. Asghar Khan (Author). Be the first to review this item. The author entered the political arena in 1968, and led a movement for the restoration of democracy in Pakistan. He renounced the awards of Hilal-i-Pakistan and Hilal-i-Quaid-i-Azam in January 1969 as a mark of protest against the government's policy of suppression. M. Asghar Khan formed his own political party, the Tehrik-i-Istiqlal, in 1972.