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Vote of No-Confidence in Pakistan: A Case of Benzir Bhutto, 1989 and Shawkat Aziz, 2006

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ABSTRACT

A no-confidence motion is a key feature of Pakistan's parliamentary system. Throughout Pakistan's history, this motion has been brought against three Prime Ministers: Benazir Bhutto in 1989, Shaukat Aziz in 2006, and Imran Khan in 2022. While it succeeded against Imran Khan, it failed against both Shaukat Aziz and Benazir Bhutto. This study utilizes both primary and secondary data to explore why the no-confidence motions against Benazir Bhutto and Shaukat Aziz failed. It also examines these governments' relationships with the Pakistani establishment, their foreign policies, the role of the opposition, and Pakistan's internal political situation during those periods.

Introduction

Democracy is a practice through which people elect their government representatives for a specific period of time through voting. There are two types of governments in a democracy: the parliamentary system and the presidential system. In a presidential system, the president is the head of both the state and the government, and the president is elected by the people. This system exists in countries like the United States, Turkey, and Iran. On the other hand, in a parliamentary system, the people elect Members of Parliament from their respective constituencies through elections, and the elected members of Parliament then choose the Prime Minister. This system of government exists in the UK, Canada, India, and Pakistan. The vote of no confidence is a fundamental feature of a parliamentary system, serving as a key constitutional mechanism. It

allows the legislature to hold the executive accountable by expressing dissatisfaction with the government's performance or policies. This procedure ensures that the government remains answerable to the representatives of the people. As a result, the vote of no confidence strengthens the principles of democratic governance and promotes transparency within the political system. The process involves a vote of no-confidence, which is a democratic mechanism used to remove the Prime Minister from office if they lose the support of the majority in the House of parliament.

The vote of no-confidence in Pakistan

Pakistan's constitutional provisions establish a mechanism for removing an incumbent prime minister via a no-confidence resolution which requires a simple majority. Opposition parties must formally ask the Speaker of the National Assembly to call a session if it is not in session, and the Speaker is required to comply within 14 days. Then, at the next meeting, the resolution for the no-confidence vote which is set for the next working day is distributed by the house secretary (Ali, 2022).

In the political and constitutional history of Pakistan, votes of no-confidence have been put up against the setting prime ministers thrice. The first one was placed against Benazir Bhutto in 1989 which was not successful against the prime minister, in 2006, a no-confidence motion against Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz also failed

Benazir Bhutto was the first Prime Minister of Pakistan to face a no-confidence motion in 1989. Despite the significant challenge posed by the opposition, she successfully survived the vote. The motion was spearheaded by Nawaz Sharif and supported by the opposition parties, who aimed to unseat her from the leadership. However, when the votes were counted, the opposition managed to secure only 107 votes, falling short of the majority needed to pass the motion. In contrast, Benazir Bhutto received 125 votes from the National Assembly members, ensuring her continued tenure as Prime Minister. The margin of 12 votes highlighted the relatively narrow escape, underscoring the political tensions and divisions within the Assembly at the time. Bhutto's ability to retain her position amidst such adversity demonstrated her political resilience and the support she retained among the assembly members (Ghosh, 2022).

Bhutto claimed that many National Assembly members were bribed to vote against her, with $10 million provided by a Saudi Salafi cleric, Osama bin Laden, who aimed to overthrow her government and establish an Islamic theocracy (Muñoz 2013).

Benazir Bhutto accused the President, the Commander-in-Chief of the Army, and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) of conspiring to overthrow her government before the no-confidence vote. At the time, this was seen as a political claim. However, 24 years later, intelligence officials admitted in higher courts that they had indeed engaged in political maneuvering. In a case heard by a three-member Supreme Court panel in February 2013, former Intelligence Bureau Director General Masood Khan Khattak revealed that non-political forces were behind the no-confidence vote. He pointed out that President Ghulam Ishaq Khan and Army Chief General Mirza Aslam Baig were among those eager to topple Benazir's government as quickly as possible (Aziz, 2016).

Political conflict with former Zia loyalists, along with allegations of corruption and inefficiency, have hindered Benazir Bhutto's government. Despite being Harvard-educated and the first woman to lead a Muslim-majority country, Bhutto faces challenges in gaining widespread support within Pakistan. Her association with her father's controversial rule and the local interests of Sindh, her family's home province, complicate her political standing. In Punjab, the country's most populous

and affluent province governed by the opposition, her administration has faced opposition from business leaders and politicians. Additionally, Bhutto has had conflicts with President Ghulam Ishaq Khan, who wields extensive powers under the constitution (Coll, 1989).

On October 26, 1989, Chaudhary Abdul Ghafoor introduced the motion to the National Assembly. Prior to this, the Speaker addressed the assembly, acknowledging the nation's prolonged suffering under approximately eleven years of Martial Law. He asserted that the country had strives diligently to establish this legislative body and emphasized that its success would herald the flourishing of democracy. He underscored the necessity for the House to establish precedents to ensure its enduring continuity and significance (Assembly, 1989).

He made the motion in accordance with Article 95(1) and National Assembly Rule 22. To challenge the Bhutto administration, the opposition needed 119 votes. After a lengthy debate, the proposal was put to a vote. The opposition secured only 107 votes, falling twelve short of the target. At least 30 potential supporters of the motion did not attend, with some alleging they had been bribed. The motion was defeated by a margin of 12 votes. As the debate unfolded, it became clear that the opposition had failed to convince key parliamentary blocs, including 10 members of Ms. Bhutto's own People's Party from her home province of Sindh, who had been leaning toward a change of government (Times N. Y, 2022).

Vote of No-Confidence Against Shawkat Aziz, 2006

Shaukat Aziz served as the 17th Prime Minister of Pakistan from August 28, 2004, to November 15, 2007. In addition to his role as Prime Minister, he also held the position of Finance Minister from November 6, 1999, to November 15, 2007. During his tenure, Aziz was responsible for overseeing both the nation's administrative affairs and its financial policies, playing a significant role in shaping Pakistan's economic landscape during this period (Pakistan, 2012).

Musharraf accepted Jamali's resignation. Shujaat Hussain nominated Finance Minister Shaukat Aziz as Prime Minister, who had been serving as Finance Minister since 1999. Musharraf considered Shaukat Aziz his right-hand man and the best choice for the Prime Minister's office. Upon Shaukat Aziz's appointment as Prime Minister, General Pervez Musharraf transferred all executive powers to him. Shaukat Aziz then approved many projects independently, without needing President Musharraf's permission (Shazad, Kokab, 2013).

Pakistani opposition parties have united to file a no-confidence motion against Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, accusing him of corruption and neglecting the needs of the poor. The motion, set to be debated next week, is unlikely to pass because the pro-government members hold a majority in parliament. Conservative religious parties and liberal supporters of former Prime Ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif have come together to submit the motion. Liaqat Baloch, a deputy leader of a six-party religious alliance, said on Tuesday: "All opposition parties are united on one agenda: to restore democracy and remove the military from politics" (Aljazeera, 2006).

The no-confidence motion, introduced by Qazi Hussain Ahmad, was signed by 137 National Assembly members, exceeding 20% of the House. However, only 101 members supported the motion during the vote. On August 29, 2006, the National Assembly session began, and Speaker Chaudhry Amir Hussain allowed opposition leader Maulana Fazlur Rehman to speak on the motion. Rehman criticized the government's four-year performance, highlighting its incompetency and the failure of General Musharraf's policies. He compared the current administration to those of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, which were accused of corruption and economic

mismanagement. Rehman alleged that the Musharraf government used the National Accountability Bureau to legitimize their corruption and evade accountability. He also pointed out that despite seven years, the issue of inflation due to debt remained unresolved. Additionally, he criticized the privatization of Pakistan Steel Mills, a policy opposed by the Supreme Court (Iqbal, Shahzad, Ali, Aslam, Asif, 2023).

Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz ultimately survived the no-confidence vote initiated by the united parliamentary opposition. Members of the ruling party commended him for his leadership. Aziz defended his administration, asserting that it acted in the nation's best interest and rejecting allegations of corruption made by what he termed "champions of negative politics." He criticized former Prime Ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, accusing them of embezzling national wealth and then relocating abroad. Aziz maintained that his government had never engaged in corrupt practices and was committed to the prosperity and integrity of Pakistan. However, the opposition did not succeed. To pass, the motion required 172 votes but only secured 136, while Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz received 201 votes in his favor (Times, 2022).

The factors those failed the vote of no-confidence, against Benazir Bhutto and Shaukat Aziz

A no-confidence motion typically arises due to issues like corruption, inflation, civil unrest, or misguided government policies. However, in Pakistan, such motions are often driven by personal dislike and political opposition. Historically, Pakistan has seen two significant no-confidence motions. In 1989, a motion against Benazir Bhutto failed due to a lack of cohesion and trust among the opposition parties, and the unwavering support of the Pakistan People's Party members for Bhutto. Similarly, in 2006, a no-confidence motion against Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz also failed. It is important to note that a no-confidence motion against the Chief Minister is brought under Article 136 of the Constitution, while against the Prime Miniser, it is under Article 95 (Personal Communication with Secretary General of Peshawar High Court Bar Association, Alam Khan Adenzai, Date: (2024, May 27).

In Pakistan, when opposition parties propose a vote of no confidence, securing the required numbers often becomes a highly challenging task. During Benazir Bhutto's tenure, the National Assembly comprised 237 members (personal communication with Hamza Khan, lecturer at GDC Gulabad).

According to him; on the day of the vote for the no-confidence motion against Benazir Bhutto, the opposition alliance failed to demonstrate a majority. Consequently, only 107 votes were cast against her. Benazir Bhutto herself played a pivotal role in the motion's failure. She successfully aligned smaller parties with her and claimed that the motion was initiated against her primarily because she was a woman. This narrative earned her sympathy from the public and various political groups.

In 2006, when a no-confidence motion was introduced against Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, martial law was in place in Pakistan. The MQM firmly supported Shaukat Aziz, and President Pervez Musharraf openly backed him, as he had personally appointed Aziz as Prime Minister. On the day of the vote, the opposition parties were unable to gather the required numbers in the assembly.

The no-confidence motion against Shaukat Aziz failed primarily because he enjoyed strong support from the military ruler Pervez Musharraf. Additionally, Shaukat Aziz’s government had introduced significant economic reforms that further weakened the opposition's stance. During his tenure, Pakistan's national airline recorded profits, a rare achievement since the 1980s. The

economy was improving, and the opposition lacked a compelling justification for the motion (personal communication with Hamza Khan, lecturer at GDC Gulabad).

In the 1988 general election, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), led by Benazir Bhutto, secured 94 seats and formed a government in collaboration with the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) and independent members from the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). This historic victory made Benazir Bhutto the first female Prime Minister of Pakistan (personal communication with Zahir Khan, Student of BS Political science at GDC Gulabad).

According to him; not everyone was pleased with her appointment. The establishment, which had long been dominated by men, did not want her as Prime Minister. But Benazir had some powerful allies. The United States, with whom she had prior commitments, intervened on her behalf, sending three senators to Pakistan. The US pressured the Pakistani establishment to appoint her as Prime Minister, and in return, Benazir agreed not to formulate foreign policy. Ghulam Ishaq Khan would serve as President, and she was restricted from pursuing atomic policies.
In November 1989, the opposition moved a motion of no confidence against Benazir, but it failed. The primary reasons for this failure were the opposition's inability to unite, making it difficult for them to secure the necessary votes. Additionally, the motion of no confidence required a simple majority to pass, but the opposition faced challenges in meeting this requirement due to procedural hurdles. Other factors contributing to the motion's failure included the opposition's lack of credibility and Benazir's strong coalition partnership.Benazir Bhutto's government survived the motion of no confidence, allowing her to continue as Prime Minister.

The vote of no-confidence against Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz failed because martial law was in effect in Pakistan at the time, and the democratic system was entirely suspended. A vote of no-confidence is purely a democratic process, and its success is only possible in the presence of a functioning democratic system. During martial law, parliamentary institutions and democratic values are either limited or suspended, making the success of a constitutional process like a vote of no-confidence nearly impossible.

Furthermore, under martial law, all governmental power rests in the hands of the establishment, while the parliament and other democratic institutions hold only symbolic significance. In such circumstances, it becomes almost impossible for the opposition to effectively present a vote of no-confidence or garner the required support. This was the primary reason why the vote of no-confidence against Shaukat Aziz failed (personal communication with Zahir Khan, Student of BS Political science at GDC Gulabad).

A formal vote in which members of a legislature or similar deliberative body indicate that they no longer support a leader or government. The opposition parties did not have a majority for the no-confidence votes against Benazir Bhutto and Shaukat Aziz, so those votes failed (Personal communication with ANP President UC Tazagram, Amir Shah Bukhari Date: 2024, June 13).

Conclusion

The no-confidence motions against Benazir Bhutto and Shaukat Aziz, although occurring in different political periods, both ended in failure for very similar reasons. Benazir Bhutto, in particular, pointed to the hidden influence of non-political forces behind the scenes, especially groups trying to impose an Islamic theocracy. She highlighted the unique challenges she faced as a woman leading in a male-dominated political environment. Despite the opposition's loud criticism of widespread corruption, high inflation, and the government's perceived failures, they were unable to gather the majority needed to remove either leader. The opposition's lack of unity and mutual

distrust were key problems. In Shaukat Aziz's case, the dictatorial rule of General Pervez Musharraf played a big role, suffocating opposition efforts and ensuring the motion's failure. Both no-confidence attempts, despite strong words and passionate accusations, failed because of a divided opposition and established power structures, leaving the motions as bold but unsuccessful efforts to bring about change.

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