



# WOMEN IN POLITICS & THE TRINITY OF MEN, MILITARY & MULLAH

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Politics in Pakistan is of men, by men, and for men. This may seem like a sweeping statement, but a brief feminist analysis of political spheres in the past and present proves the accuracy of this assertion. Despite the constitutionally guaranteed rights and legislations meant to improve women's access to political participation, the patriarchal contradictions in Pakistan's politics have remained unaffected since 1947, maintaining the status quo of male dominance. To aid patriarchal hegemony in politics, the 'Men, Military and Mullah' trinity have played an essential role by enabling a hostile, intolerant and violent political environment for women rights activists, voters and leaders.

The feminist analysis of Pakistan's politics provides innumerable examples of increasing patriarchal anxiety, which resurfaces time & again after witnessing women occupying public and political spaces. It is not surprising since, in our society, women's existence is only accepted or encouraged in private or public domains

when it appeases the male need and gaze. In case of doubt, watch any TV ad commercial on local channels. Women are putting on cancerous whitening creams, trying new toilet cleaning formulas, cooking, changing diapers, or wearing a beautiful bridal dresses while sitting on a mattress purchased for dowry by their beloved father. These ads show women's lives revolving around looking pretty or doing social reproductive labour so the men can fulfil their allegedly socio-economic & political duties. I still remember this shampoo commercial which showed a woman engaged in street politics, soon to be mansplained by a guy, 'We will take care of this dirty political business; you should rather look after your hair'.

The electronic and print media has maligned politics and restricted it to ultimately serving the broader interests of non-democratic entities in Pakistani politics. The notion that 'politics is dirty' has de-politicised the petty bourgeoisie middle class to a great extent

and reinforced the misconception that politics is inherently wrong, exploitative and in contradiction to the moral sensibilities of the working class. Unfortunately, due to such narratives, politics has remained in the clutches of men from elite, urbanite, capitalist and feudal backgrounds. Interestingly, women related to male politicians by blood or marriage and with certain privileges tend to continue to participate in politics, making it exclusionary for working-class men and women altogether.

Additionally, the over-developed post-colonial military and bureaucratic oligarchies Pakistan had inherited at the time of partition did not leave any room for representative democracy to prevail<sup>1</sup>. These oligarchies suppressed grassroots politics and delayed constitutional development for nearly ten years to retain political power, denying the people of Pakistan the right to form a civilian government, which functioned to weaken political institutions. Finally, in 1956 the first constitution was approved, which adopted an adult franchise and allowed both women and men the right to vote through in the electoral process. However, the failure to address structural inequalities meant that the assumption of equal rights provisions in the bourgeoisie constitution overcoming patriarchy in political structures was soon proven wrong. Women from privileged upper middle class backgrounds started engaging in political activities, only to be disappointed nine years later when General Ayub Khan orchestrated the first nationwide defamation campaign against Fatima Jinnah. She was accused of conspiring with Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan to build 'Pushtoonistan' and was later suspiciously killed. This time, the military instrumentalised the colonial sedition narrative to discredit a woman politician who garnered public support and campaigned for civilian supremacy.

Until today, these oligarchies have constantly rallied against civilian political leaders by deploying notions of 'corruption' to dismantle men in authority and backward patriarchal beliefs to tarnish the political image of women leaders. Therefore, the decades after Ayub in Pakistan's history can be termed the 'Reign of Misogyny'. Crimes against women multiplied amidst military coups. Around 200,000 women from East Pakistan were detained in Army rape camps during the 1971 war<sup>2</sup>. Later, after toppling Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's government in 1977 through a coup d'état, General Zia-ul-Haq proclaimed himself a Muslim version of Nietzsche's Übermensch (Mard-e-Momin), whose sole purpose became to play piety politics over the bodies of women.

Ironically, Zia aimed to save Pakistani society from the evils of Western culture while simultaneously fighting a proxy war for America in Afghanistan. He radicalised the masses using religion to achieve legitimacy for his dictatorial regime. Progressive writers and poets like Faiz Ahmed Faiz were imprisoned. At the same time, the likes of Bano Qudsia and Ashfaq Ahmed enjoyed favours in exchange for helping Zia demonise any modern or progressive political thought. He further

strengthened religious patriarchy by controlling discourse concerning women's bodies and their appearances in public and political spaces by regulating their conduct through the imposition of anti-women laws such as Hudood Ordinance.

During his tenure, women in politics, media and other professions were required to dress up in 'modest' clothing. Rape survivors were detained for failing to provide four male eyewitnesses to prove whether rape was committed, putting the onus on the survivor and not the accused. Soon, jails were packed with women falsely accused of adultery (Zina), creating an uproar which resulted in the formation of Pakistan's third wave of feminism under the Women Action Forum & Sindhiani Tehreek<sup>3</sup> in urban Punjab and rural Sindh.

After Zia's fall in 1988, the Mullah-Military alliance levelled their patriarchal anxiety against Benazir Bhutto, Pakistan's first woman Prime Minister. The religious clerics issued fatwas (religious edicts) against her holding office, and her political adversaries doctored and disseminated pictures of her. Until her assassination, she faced scrutiny and demonization based on arbitrary moral yardsticks developed by men in power. The same yardsticks are still in use to gauge the righteousness of women and transgender rights activists/politicians.

Despite all the challenges women in politics have faced for years, no progress in addressing structural patriarchy has been achieved. In fact, discrimination towards women in political spaces has only intensified. Misogynist slurs, abusive placards and extremely violent Twitter trends have become the norm. The narrative of 'Chadar aur Char Diwari' has gained traction again due to the vile campaigns against women political leaders by the media cells of political parties. The hatred towards women has also affected grassroots women's movements like Aurat March, which continues to suffer immense backlash from rightwing and state institutions across the country. From baseless accusations of foreign funding and baton charges by police to false blasphemy cases inciting mob violence, the organisers have fought legal battles and continue to face harassment in online spaces.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Alavi, Hamza. (1973). The State in Post-Colonial Societies: New Left Review, (74).

<sup>2</sup><https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/nov/05/bangladesh-1970s-camp-survivors-speak-out>

<sup>3</sup><https://www.jamhoor.org/read/2020/11/25/the-sindhiani-tehreek-revolutionary-feminism-in-sindh>

<sup>4</sup><https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-51748152>

On the contrary, male politicians who have been caught consuming alcohol and drugs, having extra-marital affairs, fathering children out of wedlock, and being accused of sexual harassment by their fellow women party members have only received adoration from the masses. The public, military and judiciary have shown unique generosity and benevolence to such men: and this generosity has always been denied to women rights activists or politicians. Therefore, the trinity of men, military and mullah ensures that any personal act of a male political leader is separated from his politics. Yet, every single step taken by a woman politician is monitored so it can be used to discredit her political struggle.

In a nutshell, all recent attempts at re-imagining Pakistan need to consider how to remove patriarchal malice in politics to make it safe for working-class men and women to participate. The usage of religious and moral patriarchal beliefs against women politicians and their impact shall be taken into account by encouraging dialogue on the subject matter. Unfortunately, not a single resolution has been moved by women parliamentarians condemning the abusive Twitter trends and character assassinations targeted at women politicians. Nonetheless, a discussion on the dual standards in Pakistan's politics must be documented and discussed in detail to reveal patriarchal contradictions & alliances discouraging women in politics.

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