

Selling Democracy: Publicity Campaigns and Basic Democracies Elections, 1959-60

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Abstract

This research examines a nationwide publicity campaign and subsequently elections of Basic Democracies held in 1959-60 under the Ayub regime. It explored that how a state-led campaign was used in legitimizing a new political order in Pakistan. Upon assuming power in 1958, General Muhammad Ayub Khan offered a localized, non-partisan form of political system as an alternative to the parliamentary systems with objective to promote stability, discipline and civic responsibilities aligning with the perceived social realities in Pakistan. The regime orchestrated a massive publicity campaign that involved mobilization of print media, Radio Pakistan, posters as well as official speeches in order to generate an articulate narrative for renewal of democratic institutions. The campaign helped mobilizing public for participating and contesting local bodies elections in both the wings of Pakistan. The paper brings out that how the regime propagated the new political system along with the projection of the image of Ayub Khan as a modernist reformer and the mastermind of a new state, that was progressive and modern. It was a combination of institutional outreach and leader-based publicity which contributed to the strengthening of the legitimacy of the military regime in the name of democratic reconstruction.

Key Words: Publicity Campaign, Basic Democracies, Elections, Ayub Regime

Introduction

The Martial Law imposed in October 1958, marked a radical change in the political journey of Pakistan, which overthrew the government and led to initiative of a new experiment for political restructuring by General Muhammad Ayub Khan. Rejecting parliamentary democracy as incompatible to social and political situation in Pakistan, the regime came up with the system of Basic Democracies. At the heart of this change was a massive publicity campaign that was not only aimed at enlightening the masses but also to actively influence political consciousness, reinvent democratic action and justify the emerging authoritarianism regime.

This paper explores the nationwide publicity campaign before the Basic Democracies elections in 1959-60. The paper contextualizes the campaign by placing it in the context of the standard of political engineering and regime consolidation, and how the language of democracy and electioneering was used to create consent and build legitimacy for Ayub regime. The research finds three major aspects of the campaign, including the propagation of the same message to every class and group of population, the symbolic exaltation of the 'Basic Democrats' as the representatives of the participatory citizenship and the use of the rhetoric of development to build the connection between the new system and the national progress. In general, the paper sheds light on how the controlled media, official narrative and political symbolism were utilized to sell democracy and to provide support and consolidation to Ayub Regime at the early stage. Based on the archival and official records, and the reporting of press, the paper focuses on determining how the campaign projected Basic Democracies and how elections took place for grassroots democratic system, that gave ordinary people a voice and promised an efficient governing system. It is archival

research, and qualitative approach is applied along with Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* (9th Edition).

Establishing a New Political Order

After taking over the reign of administration, the “revolutionary regime” pledged itself to the task of “cleaning up the mess” and re-building national life in all spheres in order to make the country healthy, robust and strong. After one year, the Ayub regime claimed the period of one year was “full of achievements, both long-term and short-term.” According to the president Ayub Khan “the purpose is to prepare the country suitably for the representative form of Government to come in and flourish” (Government of Pakistan, Cabinet Division, 1959a, p. 5)

In order to establish a new political order, it was considered first to discredit the former political leadership. To this end, Ayub Khan introduced, Public Offices Disqualification Order (PODO) in March 1959 and Elective Bodies Disqualification Order (EBDO) in August 1959 (The Gazette of Pakistan, 1959). Following the law, many political leaders, members of the assemblies and intelligentsia were disqualified on the account of corruption and malpractices (Von Vorys, 1965, p. 190). This process of de-politicization by cleansing through appointed tribunals of Martial Law Administration reflected the ideological and personal biases of the regime to malign the existing political leadership. However, in December 1966 the controversial laws were abrogated.

Having successfully driven the former political players out of the field, an arena was set to launch a new political class. Therefore, Ayub Khan in October 1959 under the umbrella of Basic Democracy (BD) presented a scheme of controlled and guided democracy at gross root level (Dawn, 1959a). Under the framework, 80000 Basic Democrats were to be elected: 40000 from

each wing. As Ayub Khan stated that these BD members in due course of time would replace the traditional “*Mai Baap*” in politics (Ayub Khan, n.d., p. 4). Basic Democracies were considered a major step towards the rehabilitation of the nation and would provide “base for the future political edifice of the country”. It was emphasized that “a vigorous nation-wide campaign should be launched now to explain to the people the concept of the Basic Democracies and the method of their working so that they have an adequate knowledge of their new responsibilities before they embark upon them” (Government of Pakistan, Cabinet Division, 1959a, p. 5).

Objectives of the Publicity Campaign

After establishing control over the country, the Ayub regime pledged itself to the task of cleaning up the mess and re-building national life in various spheres in order to make the country healthy, robust and strong (Government of Pakistan, Cabinet Division, 1959a, p. 5). Among the long-term objectives were transforming the political and democratic system. As Ayub Khan stated that changes “are being done with speed and for a purpose. The purpose is to prepare the country suitably for the representative form of Government to come in and flourish.” It was believed that it would be a “major step towards the rehabilitation of the nation” and provide the base for the future political edifice of the country. For that purpose, it was decided to launch a vigorous nation-wide campaign “to explain to the people the concept of the Basic Democracies and the method of their working so that they have an adequate knowledge of their new responsibilities before they embark upon them” (Government of Pakistan, Cabinet Division, 1959a, p. 5). The main objectives of the campaign were:

- a) To create in the people an awareness of the indigenous concept of democracy that is being introduced and enthruse them to make this scheme a success.

- b) To educate the largest possible number of voters regarding the merits and mechanics of Basic Democracies, and to make them conscious of their responsibility, in electing the “right- type” of persons under this system.
- c) To utilize this campaign in building up national solidarity and pride in the democratic system suited to the genius of our people.
- d) To create in them an urge to contribute towards the building up of a healthy social order in the country (Government of Pakistan, Cabinet Division, 1959a, p. 6).

The objectives set for the Basic Democracies publicity campaign reflects a broader picture of the overall political and administrative intentions of the regime. The aims indicate that the campaign was not as much about the establishing a participatory democratic culture rather creating public consent and awareness for new political system. This assertion of the supposed introduction of an indigenous notion of democracy was actually an attempt to culturally justify the system of Basic Democracies by explaining it as something natural and compatible to Pakistani conditions. The call to make the voters choose the “right people” reveals the paternalistic nature of the campaign. It is an indicator of a managed electoral space. The campaign was not intended to promote free competition, but rather to control the behavior of voters in a manner that would suit the state preferences, which proves controlled and non-pluralistic nature of the system of Basic Democracies.

The officials associated with the regime was seriously thinking that public might treat BD system as “old wine in new bottles” and remain indifferent (Ahmad, n.d.-a, p. 22). For that matter it was required to explain the characteristics of new political philosophy to public in the length and breadth of the country. In this regard Ayub Khan himself took a keen interest and “extensively

toured the country to explain the merits of system to the people” and focused on the “vast powers given to the Union Councils” along with the ‘scope’ of the Union Councilors to serve the community particularly in rural areas (Ahmad. n.d.-a, p. 22).

Agencies and Machinery Involved in the Campaign

For carrying out the publicity campaign various agencies (central and provincial), provincial departments and district authorities were involved. From the center, Bureau of National Reconstruction, Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, Press Information Department, Department of Advertising, Films & Publications, Radio Pakistan and Village AID Organization were engaged. Whereas, at provincial level Bureau of National Reconstruction, Directorates of Public Relations were given the responsibility (Government of Pakistan, Cabinet Division, 1959a, p. 6). Some other agencies and individuals in both official and non-official capacity were involved in campaigns. In official capacity, Divisional, District and Tehsil/Sub-Division Reconstruction Groups, personnel of the Village AID, Agriculture, Animal Husbandry, Co-operatives, Education, Health and Local Self-Government Departments were involved. Whereas, in non-official capacity writers, teachers, pressmen, and social welfare organizations were assigned the responsibility to carry the message to the public (Government of Pakistan, Cabinet Division, 1959a, p. 7). These arrangements were typical with the intention to disperse the message of the regime by using socially embedded forms of communication, and in the process, gain legitimacy, and limit dissent.

Supervision and Control of Publicity Material

The overall responsibility of supervision and control of the campaign was assigned to Bureau of National Reconstruction. The campaign started on October 15, 1959, and continued till the

completion of Basic Democracies elections. It was clearly instructed to relevant agencies to give a “top priority to such tasks as may be assigned to them from time to time by the Bureau of National Reconstruction” (Government of Pakistan, Cabinet Division, 1959a, p. 7). In each district, the Chairman of the Reconstruction Groups had the responsibility of implementing the scheme. For achieving the objectives of the campaign, the government officials were engaged for “arranging public meetings, *Meelad Mahfils*, groups discussions, cultural shows, *Mushairahs*, song publicity and distributing pamphlets and leaflets” (Government of Pakistan, Cabinet Division, 1959a, p. 7). Furthermore, the campaign focused on approachable segment of society including members of intelligentsia, university students, professors and teachers, writers and journalists, lawyers and doctors, civil servants, business and commercial communities. As far as rural areas are concerned, public meetings were addressed by specially briefed 'speakers' at central places at weekly fairs and sometimes in mosques. Moreover, mobile cinema units, pamphlets, posters, songs, radio programs and skits were the main tools for spreading the message regarding Basic Democracies (Government of Pakistan, Cabinet Division, 1959a, pp. 7-8).

As far as nature of publicity materials was concerned, it comprised of pamphlets, posters and cinema slides. The Department of Advertising, Films and Publications played a central role in production of the material while the Provincial Bureaus of National Reconstruction shouldered the responsibility for distribution to the public. The pamphlets carried the “Introduction of Basic Democracies in Pakistan” in English, Urdu, Bengali, Sindhi and Pushto languages explaining the concept of Basic Democracies and its suitability to the genius of Pakistani people and the conditions in the country (Government of Pakistan, Cabinet Division, 1959a, pp. 7-8).

Media Strategies

In order to make the radio audience ‘familiarize’ with and to build up a ‘receptive attitude’ towards Basic Democracies, Radio Pakistan took initiative for broadcasting special programs from all the stations. Even the Radio Pakistan arranged advance publicity through special announcements made on radio. The efforts put in were supplemented through making arrangements for ‘community listening’ by the Chairman of the District Reconstruction Groups. For remote areas, Provincial Directorates of Public Relations was entrusted with the responsibility to distribute radio-talked based leaflets and pamphlets (Government of Pakistan, Cabinet Division, 1959a, p. 11).

Basic Democracies were promoted in both the wings through a lasting media campaign by the Provincial Public Relations Directorates. It was instructed that no less than “three leading articles appear during the period of the campaign in each daily paper”. Similarly, weekly, fortnightly and monthly periodicals were persuaded to publish editorials and special articles in each issue. Newspapers were influenced to produce their own “special articles” on the material supplied to them by the Directorates of Public Relations. The Directorates, however, produced special articles for such newspapers, weeklies, fortnightlies and monthlies which were unable to do so within their own resources. Daily newspapers were forced to publish increasing numbers of letters regarding Basic Democracies. Even, the newspapers were urged to publish cartoons regarding the benefits of Basic Democracies (Government of Pakistan, Cabinet Division, 1959a, p. 12).

Targeting Social Groups

The District Magistrates/Deputy Commissioners and their sub-ordinate authorities had to ensure the distribution of pamphlets among the teachers and students through (a) public and school reading rooms and libraries, (b) common rooms of teachers, (c) common rooms for students and head of institutions and departments. In order to ensure that the pamphlets are widely read, it was decided that the Doctors, Lawyers, Business and Commercial Community would receive these pamphlets at their residential and not official addresses (Government of Pakistan Cabinet Division, 1959a, p.12). Similarly, the writers, journalists and civil servants were provided with the publicity material through Public Relations Directorates at their respective residences. The dramatic societies of different colleges were approached and advised playing dramas and cultural performances based on themes related to Basic Democracies. On the other hand, the district magistrates were directed to organize the general *Mushairas* in which poems about Basic Democracies to be recited (Government of Pakistan, Cabinet Division, 1959a, p. 13).

The small number of intelligentsias got an excessive amount of English and Urdu content, to the extent as being interested in influencing the opinion of the elite and gaining ideological support among opinion-makers. Literate and the rural population were being targeted with far more substantial amounts meaning that mass persuasion was the priority. Women were also strictly conceived as middle-class housewives, exposing a gendered and classed appearance of political involvement, in which they were talked to as domestic agents, and not as political agents in their own right.

A coordinated communication strategy was applied to reach women through various channels. Specialized film-shows were organized for women particularly in rural area. Provincial

Bureau and District Reconstruction Groups were assigned to distribute pamphlets in the locality and reach out to women's hostels, hospitals, and to organizations working for women. Special meetings for women including *Meelad Mahfils* and *Meena Bazaars* were organized which comprised of cultural events with short lectures or films to spread the message. Furthermore, for screening the specially prepared films on Basic Democracies in rural areas, mobile cinema units were extensively utilized (Government of Pakistan, Cabinet Division, 1959a, p. 16). The Provincial Bureau arranged the composition of suitable songs, in national and regional languages, to be sung at the weekly fairs, *melas* and in the markets. A number of mendicant singers were employed for this purpose. In East Pakistan, the *Ansars* were assigned this work (Government of Pakistan, Cabinet Division, 1959a, p. 17).

The division of pamphlets for different segments of the society, such as intelligentsia, literate masses, women, rural population, professionals and civil servants reflects that there was a conscious appeal for differentiated messages. Of special interest was the distribution of pamphlets in different languages. The number of Bengali publications were significantly more than the publications of other regional languages. On the other hand, the number of materials of other languages, Sindhi, Pushto, Baluchi was much lower (Government of Pakistan, Cabinet Division, 1959a, p. 18).

The philosophy and purpose behind the scheme of Basic Democracies were quite different to the ideas of practicing local government system and functioning democracy. Therefore, the regime concluded that "without a proper explanation of the new system to the people, their understanding and cooperation in working the system could not be expected to be secured." In this regard, Ayub Khan himself "extensively toured the country to explain the system to the

people” (Ahmad, n.d.-b, p. 145). A special train known as *Pak Jamhuriat* (Democracy Express) was turned into a vehicle for conveying the message about basic democracies in the country (Ziring, 1971, p. 17), (Sayeed, 1961, p. 250). It was observed that the efforts to convince people for the advantages of the system was successful in making the people aware of the enormous powers bestowed on the Union Councils (Ahmad, n.d., p. 145).

Rushbrook Williams, a renowned historian, who was the part of presidential team in 1959 in which Ayub Khan “was making his lightning tour of West Pakistan in order to get his ideas of Basic Democracies across the people” (Williams, n.d., p. 116). While explaining the personal interest of Ayub Khan to interact with the public in Lahore (the then capital of West Pakistan), Williams discussed the response of the people. He wrote:

There was always a contingent of women sitting separately, some in burqas and some unveiled. The President would begin proceedings with a short address and explain the Basic Democracies. Then he would ask for any questions. He would answer a question about anything: whether it was the price of rice or some particular local grievance, or anything of that kind, he knew it all (Williams, n.d., p. 116-117).

Regarding public complain Ayub Khan had issued strict instructions to his staff officer to look into the matter and “have a report within 24 hours” (Williams, n.d., p. 117). However, throughout the campaign the message of the President was: “You are Pakistanis: it is up to you to take this direct opportunity of starting to run your own affairs. Only you can do it. It is because you did not do it before that our country has got into this trouble” (Williams, n.d., p. 117). The question that was frequently asked from the president by the public was “Why do you want to

change it now? What is this new system for?”. The response president most of the time made was “I and my fellows cannot be with you always to run things for you. You must learn, as Pakistanis, to run things for yourselves; unless you do this the country cannot survive” (Williams, n.d., p. 117). During the campaign, in a day, the president used to address three to four different public gatherings (Williams, n.d., p. 118).

In general, the publicity campaign indicates its dual nature of political legitimization and social engineering. Although framed in the terms of democracy, the strategies reveal that the Basic Democracies system was based on heavy-handed control, directed political actions and regime oriented communication. This was in line with the wider debate in literature that Basic Democracies was a mechanism to facilitate authoritarian leadership to establish themselves as democratic leaders while reserving a significant amount of control in terms of political participation. As the publicity strategy was highly centralized, thus, state controlled communication apparatus was applied. The introductory pamphlet aimed to explain the reason why Basic Democracies were suitable for the people and country. Instead of introducing Basic Democracies as an option, the campaign did shrink the discursive space in which it can be politically discussed.

Elections Laws and Electoral Rolls

As far as the legal and lawful process of holding the elections was concerned, lengthy discussions at the higher level concluded that a coordinated body of electoral laws throughout the length and breadth of Pakistan was utmost necessary. For that purpose, only the Central Government was entrusted with the power to promulgate such laws to ensure the element of national unity and uniformity. On the other hand, East Pakistan had already established legal

frameworks for governing and regulating the elections to Union Board, while West Pakistan was lacking similar provisions (Government of Pakistan, Cabinet Division, 1959b, p. 203). In order to ensure transparency, fairness and public confidence, apart from the standardized electoral laws at the national level the government decided to have autonomous and independent authority for supervising electoral processes. The government claimed that it would place the BD system in line with the modern democratic theory, which stresses the importance of indifferent electoral supervision (Government of Pakistan, Cabinet Division, 1959b, p. 203).

In this regard, the governors' conference: the highest body of decision making in Ayub regime, decided to establish a permanent and independent Election Authority in Pakistan for electoral proceedings from the level of Union Panchayats to the Assemblies and Presidency. Subsequently, a committee was set up, consisting of a minister, the cabinet secretary and delegates from the provincial governments with the mandate to define the organizational structure of the Election Authority, protecting its independence and to develop the legislative framework and procedural guidelines on elections (Government of Pakistan, Cabinet Division, 1959b, p. 187). Keeping in view the guidelines, the committee provided its recommendations. In the light of that recommendation, thus, a quasi-independent electoral authority was established.

After the formation of Election Authority, the electoral rolls were compiled. While focusing on the delimitation process, the existing rolls in West Pakistan were improved. To carry out the task of delimitation in West Pakistan, particularly in rural areas was assigned to the respective Deputy Commissioners. East Pakistan has already established roll revision system for periodic revisions. These roles were kept under the control of the Election Authority, considering it as a stable and impartial agency (Government of Pakistan, Cabinet Division, 1959b, p. 204). Regarding the ballot system, the complex procedures that were used in the past for general

elections, found to be unsuited to localized polling procedures and a streamlined and easy voting process was initiated (Government of Pakistan, Cabinet Division, 1959b, p. 204).

The use of the secret balloting at the initial stages was also considered as an option for considering the electoral fairness may be safeguarded through the impartial polling officials. Further, the electoral process was envisioned to take place on regional level prolonging to several weeks as opposed to nationwide conduct concomitantly. Moreover, centralization of education in the country and the election conscious campaigns were also emphasized to be a key to the maintenance of transparency and consistency. It was proposed that these efforts to be managed by the Election Authority and not local authorities which would help in reducing the number of prejudices and enhance national integrity (Government of Pakistan, Cabinet Division, 1959b, p. 205). Suggestions were floated that the members of Electoral Authority be given a duration equivalent to a period of judges of the High Court, make them financially independent in a similar manner as the Supreme Court in order to keep Electoral Authority independent (Government of Pakistan, Cabinet Division, 1959b, p. 251).

First BD Elections

The Basic Democracy campaign was thought would made the public in rural areas to receive the same limelight as others receive in the national life. It was believed would serve to create awareness among the masses to keep in mind the characters of candidates while electing them as members of Union Councils. These members would wield power for either to be good or bad (Ahmad, n.d.-a, p. 25). The first BD elections in Pakistan were held in December 1959 and January 1960. As a result, the Electoral College for the presidential election and Parliament was completed. The percentage of the casted votes of male and female in first BD elections in 1959

was 67% and 42% respectively. On average there were 2.12 contestants per seat while 17.7 percent of seats remained no contested (Ahmad, n.d.-a, p. 33). The above factors indicate that the people were keen and eager about electing the representatives in the local councils. Only 40% of the members in 1959 BD elections were those who had served in the former Union Boards and almost 60% were elected first time. This indicates the interest that prevails in the struggle to become a local leader (Ahmad, n.d.-a, p. 33). In 1959 the greatest proportion of the elected members belonged to the age group of 30-50 which made about 79.9 percent. As far as educational qualification is concerned 2.2% Illiterate, below secondary level 87.06% and secondary and above 10.74% BD members got elected (Ahmad, n.d.-a, p. 34). But 95% of the elected Basic Democrats were individuals that were known to be good and to the service to the society. They got elected without spending any large amounts or applying any influence (Ahmad, n.d.-a, p. 65). In certain places overwhelmingly voters came out from homes to cast their votes. It is argued that in some areas the turn out reached up to 85 per cent (Qadir, n.d., p. 14). As the voters belonged to the same small area, so there were very less chances of malpractices as they knew each other. In the elections, some wealthy individuals also tested their fate. It is claimed that in elections some of the big landlords lost to common peasants (Qadir, n.d., p. 14). As far as occupational status of the BD members is concerned, in 1959 farmers overwhelmingly dominated the results. The data reflects that 82.46% farmers, 15.60% businessmen and government contractors, 0.65% lawyers, teachers and doctors and 1.29% others elected as BD members (Ahmad, n.d.-a, p. 98).

Rural and urban dichotomy came to surface regarding voting turnout. It was reported that turnout in rural areas was much heavier than urban centers. According to reports, polling in the towns of East Pakistan including Baraisal and Bogra was even reached 80 to 90 percent, likewise, in West Pakistan, in Lahore turnout was recorded about 40 to 50 percent. While in the rural areas

of Sialkot, Gujranwala and Sheikhpura was reported 70 to 80 percent. The situation of the Peshawar city was quite similar. The reports also suggest that the polling was unexpectedly heavy among women voters. For instance, in Gujranwala, 80 to 90 per cent of the female voters cast their votes (Dawn, 1959b).

Some provisions of the Basic Democracies Order made the government to make special arrangement for elections keeping in view the peculiar social and economic conditions of the area. For example, the electorate of the states of Dir, Chitral and Swat were composed solely of male adults, while in other areas where tribal leaders possessed immense influence they constitute the electorate for BD members (Mahmood, 1964, p. 13).

The BD members elected from East Pakistan had no political base and mostly were accused by the public of being criminal and police agents. It was very difficult for these members to be elected at any level of transparent election (Talukdar, 2009, p. 149). Thus, the investigated outcomes revealed that the BD system “developed into a sense of frustration amongst the people who were more political conscious than the West Pakistanis and they began to feel that if military rule and Martial Law were to continue then they would be reduced to a colony and would never have any participation in the governance of the country” (Hamoodur Rahman Commission, n.d., p. 44).

Conclusion

The analysis of the Basic Democracies publicity campaign and the elections in 1959-60 indicate that Ayub regime had employed democratic language and mechanisms as techniques for political legitimacy rather than representative governance. A massive, state monitored propaganda campaign, involving print media, radio, films, open forums of communication, was aimed at

redefining political consciousness by instilling official discourse of order, development and native democracy. The regime diminished the margin of political contestation by eroding the credibility of past political leadership and then making Basic Democrats as a suitable and discipline political alternative to parliamentary democracy. The focus on voter education as the right kind of representative was an attempt to have a paternalistic and controlled electoral process, in which persuasion and management were more important than democratic pluralism.

Although the Basic Democracies elections created public participation on the ground, and created new actors in the grassroots politics, their more significant political role was in cementing the authority of the military regime. The symbolic upliftment of Basic Democrats and the projection of Ayub Khan as a modernist reformer, assisted in strengthening the legality of the regime leading to the completion of an Electoral College that elected Ayub Khan as president of Pakistan in 1960. However, the structural constraints of the system were brought to the surface by the manipulated political involvement, the developing regional inequalities especially in East Pakistan and dependence on centralized propaganda. The research reflects that the Basic Democracies experiment despite its success in producing short term legitimacy based on state controlled publicity and controlled elections, proved to bring in the limelight the latent inherent defection in Basic Democracies which existed in a tenuous structure with limited political liberties.

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