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Pakistan's Students--
A Nation in their Hands?

Im Rosental 96
53 Bonn
West Germany
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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, N. Y. 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

With German universities now closed until the summer semester begins on April 15, and my research regarding the older generation's view of today's West German youth not yet flushed out to my satisfaction, I'm devoting this newsletter to a talk I had this week with a gentleman from Pakistan who returned recently from a three months' visit to his explosive homeland.

Although newspaper reports have acknowledged the role played by the nation's students in President Ayub Khan's promise to relinquish power, and their part in the current popular support for Shiekh Majibur Rahman in the East and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in West Pakistan, the students' strength as a responsible political force, contends my Pakistan friend, is being underrated by Western observers. In East Pakistan, particularly, he said, it is the students who are "the most active, the most political and the best organized" among all sections of the seventy million population. "They are the avant-garde in every field."

Unlike student movements in the West, which have a common denominator in student demands for a greater role in university decision-making, the Pakistan students are willing to leave the universities within the control of the university authorities, but they want the central government to keep its hands off. Western student movements also claim, with varying degrees of emphasis, a common bond in socialistic goals. But as far as socialism is concerned in Pakistan, the Pakistani told me, "we have elementary demands that have to be taken care of first-- food, shelter and clothing. Socialism is a luxury that a rich country can indulge in...Pakistan cannot."

Bhutto, the reputedly pro-Peking darling of the West Pakistan students, lists "Islam, socialism and democracy" as the three tenets of his campaign, but "many don't believe him and the others are outraged at the mention of the word 'socialism.'"

Indeed, Tariq Ali, the Pakistan-born revolutionary who was until recently a leader of England's New Left, has scoffed that Bhutto stands to the right of England's Harold Wilson.

The key to the strength of Pakistan's student movement, said the Pakistani, lies in the Eastern section of the nation, which is geographically and culturally divided from West Pakistan. East Pakistan is rural, overcrowded, an agricultural land whose chief products are jute, rice and sugar. Population density is 700 or more persons per square mile in the country, up to 1800 per square mile in the cities. Despite poverty, the flat, alluvial delta of the Ganges River is a land of "summertime...and the livin' is easy."

"Most are poor and some are hopelessly poor," explained the Pakistani, "but perhaps life has been too easy for them. The peasant puts seed into the ground, smokes his water pipe, and Almighty God takes care of the rest. Of course the Almighty occasionally sends floods, but life is usually good. There's been no real struggle against nature."

West Pakistan, on the other hand, with a land area five times larger than East Pakistan, is sparsely settled and most of its 310,536 square miles are barren wasteland. But its natural resources include coal, gas, oil, iron and sulphur deposits. Since the divided nation was declared independent in 1947, West Pakistan has shown amazing industrial and economic growth--the World Bank called Pakistan "a jewel among developing nations."

With its poor population tied together by a common Bengal culture, East Pakistan developed a society which is essentially democratic and egalitarian. West Pakistan, a conglomerate of languages and cultures, has a heterogeneous feudal society, which nonetheless runs its affairs, explained the Pakistani, "in the well-ordered ways of state." West Pakistan is the seat of the central government (formerly at Karachi, now in Islamabad), the home of the "Establishment" and the source of power in the civil service and the Army. The leaders of East Pakistan serve essentially as "communications officers."

After the nation's independence, East Pakistan leaders protested time and again against West Pakistan's discrimination. "But East Pakistan did not have an Establishment at home to support the agitation, and these efforts failed...bitterness and resent against the central government grew among the educated public of East Pakistan."

"The central government did try, although certainly not with great vigor, to aid the East Pakistan regions," admitted the Pakistani, himself one of the few from the eastern section who have been educated abroad. "Dacca was named the seat of

the national assembly, but they never got around to moving all the assembly apparatus there. The assembly itself meets in Dacca only twice a year in token adherence to the constitutional requirement. Half-hearted efforts were made to increase East Pakistan representation in the civil service, and it is certainly not as lopsided now as twenty years ago. But seventy percent of the Establishment--and virtually all the key positions in the Army and civil service--is still controlled by West Pakistan."

With individual political leaders unable to provide the constancy and strength required to promote East Pakistan demands, the students stepped into the void.

Their first demonstration of power was in 1952, when Bengali-speaking East Pakistan students protested by the thousands against the Karachi government's naming Urdu (itself not even one of the five major languages of the West Pakistan tribes) the official language of the new nation. Bowing to the student outcry, the Karachi leaders agreed to make Pakistan a bi-lingual nation, elevating Bengali to the same official plane as Urdu.

Two years later the East Pakistan students also played a significant role in routing the Muslim League party, "an extension of the West Pakistan government," in provincial elections.

Since 1954, the students have continued to agitate for increased home rule in East Pakistan, but the central government had been able to quell any movement at the crucial point by closing down the Dacca and Rajshahi universities. "The university authorities, who knew who held the strings of power, would shut the doors when the central government said to. Since the students are mostly from rural areas, and most of them live in university-provided housing, they have no money and must return to their villages when the schools are closed. Then the protest movement fizzles out for a while."

In 1968, however, Ayub Khan's government passed a university ordinance intended to quiet the student disturbances by curtailing the rights of the university senates and the students themselves. A particularly onerous clause gave university authorities the right to revoke intermediary degrees earned after two years' study if students misbehaved. "This took away their bread," said the Pakistani, "the chance for further study toward a bachelor's degree or an important document in applying for a job." The ordinance prompted a new outbreak of student demonstrations which coincided with Ayub Khan's own ill health and the breakdown of his personalized administration.

In West Pakistan, Bhutto added the student protests to

his opposition campaign against Ayub Khan. "Bhutto has always tried to project a youthful image, and during the last year he has been able to politicalize the West Pakistan students, who until recently had taken only sporadic interest in politics. They had not been organized like the East Pakistan students."

Authorities closed the Dacca university again last year, but the East Pakistan students didn't go quietly back to the villages. "There's been very little studying done, and that may not be good for a country which has so much catching up to do," mused the Pakistani, "but who can tell what is the ideal choice."

After the police killed a student in West Pakistan, more violent protest riots broke out in East and West Pakistan. A general strike was called, and in East Pakistan (to a lesser degree in West Pakistan) the government administration "was knocked out completely." Through a relentless campaign of demonstrations, strikes, discussion meetings (teach-ins in Western terminology), the students forced the government to release Shiekh Majibur Rahman from jail.

"At the moment it's a happy marriage between Rahman and the East Pakistan students, but it is the students who are really in control. I did not realize myself until this visit how deep the water is running," said the Pakistani, "but if the students need to go it alone, they will."

"Law and order has collapsed, but the students are trying to keep the movement within peaceful channels," he added. Newspaper reports from Dacca today tell of mob rule, but mention the establishment of student "people's courts" which are passing sentence on the local civil servants who are loyal to the Ayub Khan regime. One student leader is quoted: "We are travelling through villages pleading with people not to resort to killings. We have asked them to set up courts and fine Muslim Leaguers. In a way it has been successful. They are paying up their thousands rather than have their houses burned."

Unlike the West, where student movements have found little echo among the general population, the students of Pakistan are respected and followed, said the Pakistani. "We have the Oriental idea of respect for education."

What the East Pakistan students are demanding, in political terms, is autonomy or home rule. "The hard core of the students is moderate, and the elements which go so far to the left as to talk of social revolution are really of no consequence," he explained.

Socialist revolutionary Tariq Ali, who recently returned to his home in West Pakistan, is scorned by his fellow students

there. A Bengal student leader in Lahore told a German reporter recently that "if Tariq comes to East Pakistan, he'll be lynched." (This was obviously overstatement for effect. Tariq did visit East Pakistan this week, talked to student leaders, and in an interview with BBC he praised their organization and purpose, adding that the West Pakistan student movement was pale by comparison.)

A son of one of West Pakistan's richest men, Tariq is scarcely acceptable to the Islamic Pakistan students, who resent his anti-religious statements while he was in London, and his "opportunistic" kissing of the Koran on his return to Pakistan. Said another student in Lahore: "Don't think that Tariq came back home because of the revolution. Every year his family has a big reunion at which they discuss the administration of their fortune. He's also here to attend some marriages in the family, just as any good Pakistani would do. I should know--I'm his cousin."

Although socialism, in the Western student sense of the word, is not what the students have in mind, they will not be satisfied with a mere increase in parliamentary seats for East Pakistan, the Pakistani pointed out. The nation's present constitution allows for fifty-fifty parity between East and West Pakistan, which in parliamentary terms already means an unfair balance against the East, whose population far exceeds that of West Pakistan. "The students won't accept just the one man, one vote idea now. They are fighting to be masters in their own house."

Does this mean a separatist movement, I asked, the formation of a new state? "After recent events, the sentiment for separation may grow," he predicted, "because the discussions between the leaders of East Pakistan and Ayub Khan have proved fruitless."

The results of the present chaos, said the Pakistani, will probably be military rule, "with or without Ayub Khan. It may not be a step in the right direction, but in the last couple of months we have become prisoners of events. Nobody is leading the events, we are being led by them. And it looks more and more implausible that these tangles can be worked out politically."

"This total confusion can't go on. Every day there is a new strike for higher wages. The government can't negotiate so they print more money. People are being killed, the authorities have lost control completely." Under a temporary military regime, he concluded, law and order can be re-established, and the leaders of various elements can be called together to work out a "sensible framework."

When this occurs, the Pakistani is confident the organized students will oversee the peaceful transition to a new

government. Despite the current chaos, he believes the student movement in Pakistan favors non-violent means.

"Che Guevara and the prophets of violence among the youth in the West are almost unknown in Pakistan," explained my Pakistan friend. "At their demonstration on February 21 this year, commemorating the student martyrs who were killed in 1952 during the Bengali language riots, the students went around to all the houses in Dacca and asked permission to take flowers from the gardens. Then they placed the flowers on the monument."

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Barbara Bright". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Barbara Bright

Received in New York March 26, 1969.