"No, This is Pakistan"

by Trish Elliott

"Please madame, remove your headscarf."

In answer I cast the Pakistani immigration official a sharp glance. Travel in Islamic lands has conditioned me to regard this as a decidedly improper request and I expect a leer and a wink. Instead the official carries on in a business-like manner.

"It is not necessary. You are no longer in Iran. This is Pakistan."

This exchange at the tiny desert post in Baluchistan province is a fitting introduction to one of the political contradictions of Pakistani life. From the lowest border officer to the highest government ranks there is an eagerness among Pak officialdom to show visitors that their country can remain liberal and enlightened despite Islamization and martial law. It is a message that appeals to western ears. It is not a message that extends to the people of the country that broadcasts it. Pakistan has been held in the grip of martial law since 1958. As I was to witness, dissent is not tolerated and liberal ideas are ruthlessly ferreted out of the political mainstream.

I cross the small compound to where our Bedford truck sits simmering in the heat. From the grunts of disapproval I am made aware that the guards have come across a stack of magazines and posters picked up at an Iranian propaganda centre.

"This is not good," a guard says sternly. "Ayatolla bad. This is Pakistan."

So this is my introduction to Pakistan — an introduction which was never to end, for each person I was to meet had their own way of saying, "No, *this* is Pakistan."

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It is October 1983. Crossing the Baluchistan desert toward the oasis city of Quetta I am only vaguely aware that I have entered Pakistan at a special time. Letters from home and scattered news reports have informed us of riots in Karachi and of trouble with Afghanistan along the northwestern frontier. The people of Sind province, long a region of conflict, are rising up against General Zia ul-Haq's military government. Because past grievances in Sind have generally been regional in character and directed against the dominant Punjabis I am surprised by a BBC Home Service report which tells of sympathy demonstrations in Lahore, Punjab. The demonstrations have ended in violence and arrests. More action is expected.

Balvis Rubess

Our company greets the news with apprehension. We had been looking forward to a few days of rest and relaxation in the Punjabi capital. For the moment, however, Lahore is a long way off. Our spirits are high as we pull into Quetta. We are tantalized by the thought of good restaurants and the first chance to bathe in many weeks.

Turning into Jinnah Road we are jolted by the sight of police lining the broad main street. They are in full riot gear: arm shields, helmets, batons and heavy boots. The menacing sight is incongruous with the quiet, nearly empty street. Soon after parking the truck a small crowd begins to gather, highly excited and eager to explain recent events. A riot has just occurred, right here on Jinnah Road. Police quashed the demonstrators, killing two and wounding many others. The helmeted policemen are quick to notice the excited citizens clustered around our vehicle. Soon they wade in, faces grim and batons raised. There is a brief moment of turmoil as the batons come down, a desperate scramble, and our welcome party is dispersed in all directions.

Later that day, seated in the courtyard of a small lodge, I have time to reflect on events. Political unrest is no stranger to Baluchistan. Like Sind, Baluchistan has been forever unhappy about its union with Pakistan. A common complaint is that the central government exploits the region's natural resources with no return to the Baluchi people. In addition, the people have to a large degree been left out of the province's civil administration. Only 20 per cent of government jobs are held by Baluch tribesmen, the rest mainly by the dominant Punjabis. Likewise, three-quarters of the province's police are non-Baluch. In 1973 Prime Minister Zulfika Ali Bhutto decided to remove the power of the *sardars*, tribal governors. A tragic civil war followed which lasted four yeas and claimed 10,000 lives. Although amnesty was declared when Zia took power, resentment over the inequitable system remained.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Quetta is the scene of violent demonstrations. What is remarkable is the speed with which the city has been drawn into the latest wave of conflict originating in far-off Sind. Solidarity between movements is unusual in this regionally torn country. Even more interesting is the Punjab's participation. The Punjab has always held the upper hand in Pakistani politics and economics. The Lahore demonstrations signal a new development: the dominant racial group, often despised by their countrymen as the bulwark of the regime, have joined with their poorer cousins in an attack against military rule.

As evening falls I am joined by the lodge owner and a small group of Afghan refugees. After prayers, Coca-Colas are passed around and a radio is produced. Despite heated exchanges earlier over the price of lodging, all is friendly now as together we enjoy the starlight and the cooling air. Seated next to me is a man in his mid-40s. "You should know," the hotelman says, "that this man has killed 35 Russians. He is a rebel general."

The Afghan presence has brought a new dynamic to Pakistani society. The tall figures with the glittering eyes can be seen in every marketplace and teashop from Quetta to Peshawar. In the

past Baluch and Pathan tribesmen cared little about borders and international conflict. The lines drawn by Kabul and Islamabad were meaningless to tribal society; travel and trade carried on between the two country's hillmen as if the borders never existed. The threat of Afghan encroachment on Pakistani territory was of little concern. Indeed, many tribesmen favored linking with Afghanistan under communist rule. But now communism had taken on a new face — that of a Soviet-installed regime hard against the indigenous people.

The influx of intensely anti-Soviet refugees and the threat of military aggression is bound to change attitudes about the future of Baluchistan. Importantly, however, it has not created a new sense of loyalty to Zia's Pakistan. At the most one could expect the refugees, with their tales of death and glory in the defense of traditional life, to fan the Baluchi desire for tribal sovereignty. The province's young intellectuals, however, are reaching beyond that concept. By joining with the Sind-based Movement for the Restoration of Democracy, they have begun a broader struggle to create a new Pakistan. It is clear that a national movement is taking root in isolated, under-developed Baluchistan.

The following day reports in an English-language paper show Zia on the defensive. The front page is devoted to the General's address to Pakistan's national writer's association. The speech reveals once more the contradiction of a harsh fundamentalist military regime trying to pass itself off as liberal and tolerant. Zia reaffirms his government's commitment to freedom of expression and notes that in six years no writer has been "jailed or denied pen and paper." In the same breath he warns writers against "intellectual anarchy" and invites anyone writing about non-Moslem ideas to do so in another country. In a later report the public is assured that recent violence is the work of a small group of societal misfits in Sind. No mention is made of corresponding demonstrations in Pakistan's other provinces. Rumours that rail service has been disrupted are denied.

While Zia engages in the public game of downplaying dissent, the police have been mobilized to the fullest extent in all corners of Pakistan. In Peshawar, which we visit in the Northwest Frontier province, the timeless trade in weapons and brass, spices and hash carries on. Ox carts still lumber through the crowded streets of the Qissa Khawani and old men gather at the tea stalls to smoke their hookahs and gossip. Yet some things have changed. The Chowk Yad Gar, once a meeting place for political discussion, is silent and at least 20 armed police circle the central monument which once served as an impromptu podium. After dark one night a small but vocal group of protestors make their way down the main street of the New Town. They disperse quickly before a confrontation can occur.

Peace still exists in some parts of Pakistan. Hunza Valley, lost in the folds of northern Pakistan's Karakorum Mountains, provides us a dreamy escape to the past. A young man of the tiny village of Ganesh says, "Hunza is separate. As for the military government, it's of no concern to us." A frown comes to his face. "Yet before the government police came there was no trouble, no crime."

During the precarious jeep ride back to Gilget, the area's major settlement, I recall his words. It seems impossible that trouble should touch this remote mountain wilderness. The scene which greets me at Gilget provides an immediate reawakening. What was only hours before a peaceful, forgotten town slumbering in the golden autumn sunlight is now a hive of military activity. On the outskirts soldiers are posting a freshly-painted sign reading "Martial Law Zone E." Tear gas chokes the evening air. Above the roar of military helicopters my companions tell me the police moved in on full-scale rioting.

Balvis Rubess

The trouble began when a group of Shi'ite Moslems gathered in the street for their second day of ritual self-flagellation. The Sunni Moslems, Pakistan's majority sect, object strongly to this practice. The two groups hold different interpretations of the Qu'ran and resentment had been furthered by the fact that the minority group has far greater economic power in Pakistan's business world. Catcalls led to shoving, then rock throwing. Suddenly there was the sound of gunfire. The government police had arrived, both barrels blazing.

Two fellow travellers fled down a side street where they were given refuge in a local merchant's home. The merchant offered them sweet tea and an explanation for the riot. "The underlying thing is it is really directed against the government. By fighting with each other they know political instability is created, which means trouble for the regime." I find this motive hard to believe. However, I was later to read a report by *The Washington Post*'s Stuart Auerbach that carried a similar story. Auerbach reported that "some Pakistani journalists believe the religious sets may be egged on . . . to embarrass the Zia government."

Leaving Gilgit we encounter a group of perhaps 200 protestors marching down the highway. They appear jubilant and determined, not at all like people whose town has just been overrun. Late that night, bedded down in my tent by the roadside, I am awakened by their chants. It sounds as if the crowd has grown.

Where are they going? Perhaps they hope to reach Islamabad, the nation's capital. It's a two day journey by truck, yet by marching on through the night the protestors have already outpaced us. I think of the military checkpoints ahead and wonder where they'll be turned back — that they will be is more or less a certainty. Zia's forces are strong and they are everywhere.

I remember a man in Lahore telling me 90 per cent of the people are against military rule. "But Zia cannot be defeated. He is far too powerful." Looking out on the city streets, where police seem to outnumber civilians, I can believe these words.

Although democracy has been promised by 1985, few people have confidence in the possibility. In the meantime, Pakistan is faltering. The literacy rate, for example, is falling sharply as the military gobbles up funding: education receives two per cent of the national budget while military expenditures have risen to account for nearly 50 per cent. The government has suggested reforms, even promised elections, but the unrest continues.

Shortly before I entered Pakistan, *Maclean's* carried a report that outside Sind there was "indifference" toward the movement for democracy. It stated "virtually no outbreaks of violence have been reported in Pakistan's three other provinces." By the time I arrived that picture was already altered. No matter where I travelled the spread of dissent followed the same route, making itself visible even in Pakistan's remotest areas.

I was later to visit Sind, where unrest exists on a far greater scale and where I was at times to fear for my life. Yet on a lonely mountain road far from Sind, lying awake in my tent and listening to the sound of protest fading in the distance, I see Pakistan's story changing, perhaps just beginning. □

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