

# Women's Stir Threat To Zia Regime

PAKISTAN president Zia-ul-Haq has run into opposition from an unexpected quarter—the country's women. Worried by threats to their role in society as the Pakistan government turns more and more to Islamic values as interpreted by it, the women have launched a counter attack which contains the seeds of a wider political struggle.

Recently, a group of women demonstrated in Lahore against a proposed law which will make the testimony in court of one man equal the testimony of two women. The demonstrating women were mercilessly beaten and teargassed by the police. Local newspapers said that about 20 women were injured and the protest was marked by police brutality towards women unprecedented in an Islamic country.

However, the *ulema* or religious teachers, instead of protesting the violence, threatened to declare any protesting woman an apostate through a religious decree. This decree would dissolve the marriage of a married woman and compel a single woman to remain unmarried since no Muslim is allowed to marry a *kafir* or apostate. The *ulema* called on the women to repent and seek forgiveness from Allah, not by direct prayer, but through their parents and relatives.

The protest has sparked off a heated debate in Pakistani society. The issue was raised in the Majlis-e-Shoora or federal advisory council, a body nominated by general Zia. However, the handful of women members failed to get a full scale debate on what Begum Ispahani called "an unparalleled and shameful incident. You don't beat even donkeys like that." The mood of this nominated house was apparent when thunderous applause greeted a member's remark that the demonstrating women were opposed to Islam. Later in the week, male religious students held a noisy demonstration warning that they would never again tolerate a women's demonstration in the city.

Begum Atifa Mamdot, minister of state for health and social welfare, chaired a women's meeting which contemptuously

dismissed the UN charter for women's rights as an anti Islamic document. The women's demonstration was dubbed a publicity stunt of a few westernized women who deserved to be punished for treason.

Meanwhile, the All Pakistan Women's Association issued an appeal to the members of the Majlis asking them to safeguard women's rights and not to pass the law of evidence or any other discriminatory law.

The appeal pointed out that the country's top Islamic court, the federal Shariat court, had recently ruled in favour of women, saying: "What is not prohibited by the Holy Quran and the *sunna* or traditions, is permitted, and the burden of proof about anything being prohibited rests on the person who claims it to be prohibited."

The Women's Action Forum, a coordinating body of women's organizations (see Manusbi No.12 for detailed report) asserted that nowhere in the Quran was woman ever disqualified from bearing testimony. The only verse which mentions the evidence of one man and two women relates to business transactions alone. Even this verse sees men and women as equal witnesses, the role of the second woman being only that of a reminder and not of a primary witness. It also referred to a recent judgment of the Shariat court that there was no prohibition in Islam on the appointment of women as judges or magistrates.

Over the past year, while political workers have stayed off the streets since their leaders were trying to work out an effective alliance to challenge president Zia to return the country to democracy, women have staged several protests against threats to their status.

Their protests led to the television service dropping a programme by a controversial religious scholar who believes women should not be seen outside the four walls of the home.

Some people feel that the women's issue is fraught with danger for president Zia in a

country where 52 percent of the population is female. They say that unlike politicians who have been unable to mount an effective national movement against the president, because of their own disunity, women opposed to Islamization are united throughout the country.

(collated from *Indian Express* and *Times of India*)

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## Prisoner

*Here is the Ghassr prison.  
It belongs to the Shah,  
but is built for me.  
I am an angry prisoner.  
In the cold of the night  
I stare into the dark,  
through the bars of the  
tiny windows, thinking  
of the future and freedom.  
I am a bird in love, caged in  
this fortress of horrors, with clipped  
wings and a dream of flight.  
I watch the rain drops fall, washing  
away the darkness of  
the night,  
and listen to the distant murmurs.  
My head is filled  
with the thought of freedom.  
I am the selfless warrior of  
battlefields,  
the feverish prisoner of the Shah's  
Ghassr.  
These chains and steel bars,  
these burning wounds,  
these warm drops of blood,  
cries of fury,  
this ceaseless pain of days  
and nights  
can never stop the flight of dreams in  
my mind,  
can never stop the beating of love in  
my heart.  
TAP ! TAP ! TAP !  
Listen !  
to the voices coming from the city of  
night,  
to the voices of growing  
discontent,  
to the piercing voice of truth.  
Heavy sits the night upon the  
fortress.  
But murmurs are heard so well*

—*Marzieh Ahmadi Oskooi, 1945-1974*