

Democracy and authoritarianism in South Asia

A comparative and historical perspective

Ayesha Jalal

Columbia University



PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

© Cambridge University Press 1995

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1995
Reprinted 1997, 1998, 2002

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Jalal, Ayesha.

Democracy and authoritarianism in South Asia: a comparative and historical perspective / Ayesha Jalal.

p. cm. – (Cambridge South Asian studies.)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0 521 47271 7 (HC). – ISBN 0 521 47862 6 (PB)

I. South Asia – Politics and government. I. Title. II. Series.

DS341.J34 1995

320.954-dc20 94-17045 CIP

ISBN 0 521 47271 7 hardback
ISBN 0 521 47862 6 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2004

3 The 'populist' era and its aftermath in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, 1971 to c.1993

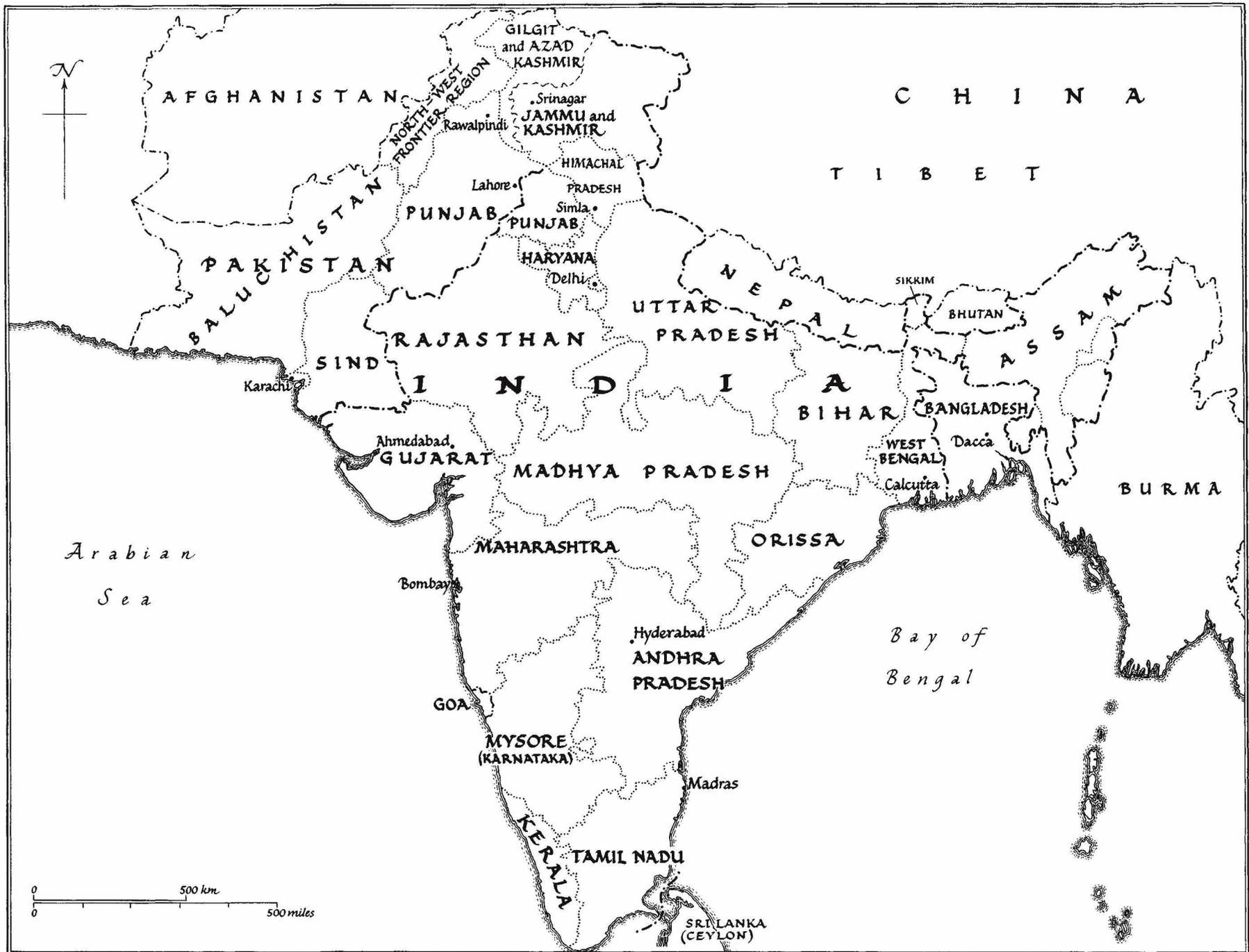
The 1970s witnessed the crystallization of significant changes in the state-society dialectic in South Asia. During the 1960s state interventions in the economy had contributed to important alterations in social structures and in the process broadened the arena of mass politics. In the absence of any perceptible movement towards the strengthening of equal citizenship rights for the many who remained outside the charmed circle of a small elite, largely unorganized resistance to established structures of dominance assumed new levels of potency. The expansion and radicalization of the social bases of politics posed challenges to oligarchical democracy and military authoritarianism alike. These were sought to be met by comparable experiments in what widely came to be termed 'populist politics' during the late sixties and the seventies.

Populism by its very nature is an elusive concept. Open to varied interpretations, populist politics in the South Asian subcontinent have escaped the exactitudes of a searching or rigorous historical analysis. To the extent that populism has been defined at all the emphasis lies on the personal aspects of the phenomenon. Yet a focus on the role of charismatic leaders has produced a somewhat shadowy, if not distorted, view of the populist drama. The appeal of populism lay in its claim to give voice to the frustrations of the dispossessed and downtrodden and in its declared aim to dent the existing structures of domination and privilege. It was really more a matter of temperament than ideology. Slogans such as *garibi hatao* (abolish poverty) or *roti, kapra aur makaan* (bread, clothing and shelter) encapsulated the spirit of the political changes being attempted, but did not rest on any systematic class analysis of social inequities. Often couched in the legitimizing idioms of the nationalist discourse, populism was more emotionally charged than organizationally cohesive. It promised to improve the wretched lot of subordinated classes, castes and communities without encouraging their empowerment through well-knit political organization. Falling short of ideological integrity but rising above the dismal cynicism of existing power equations, those who articulated the populist dream raised hopes of a better future among millions and instilled fears among privileged

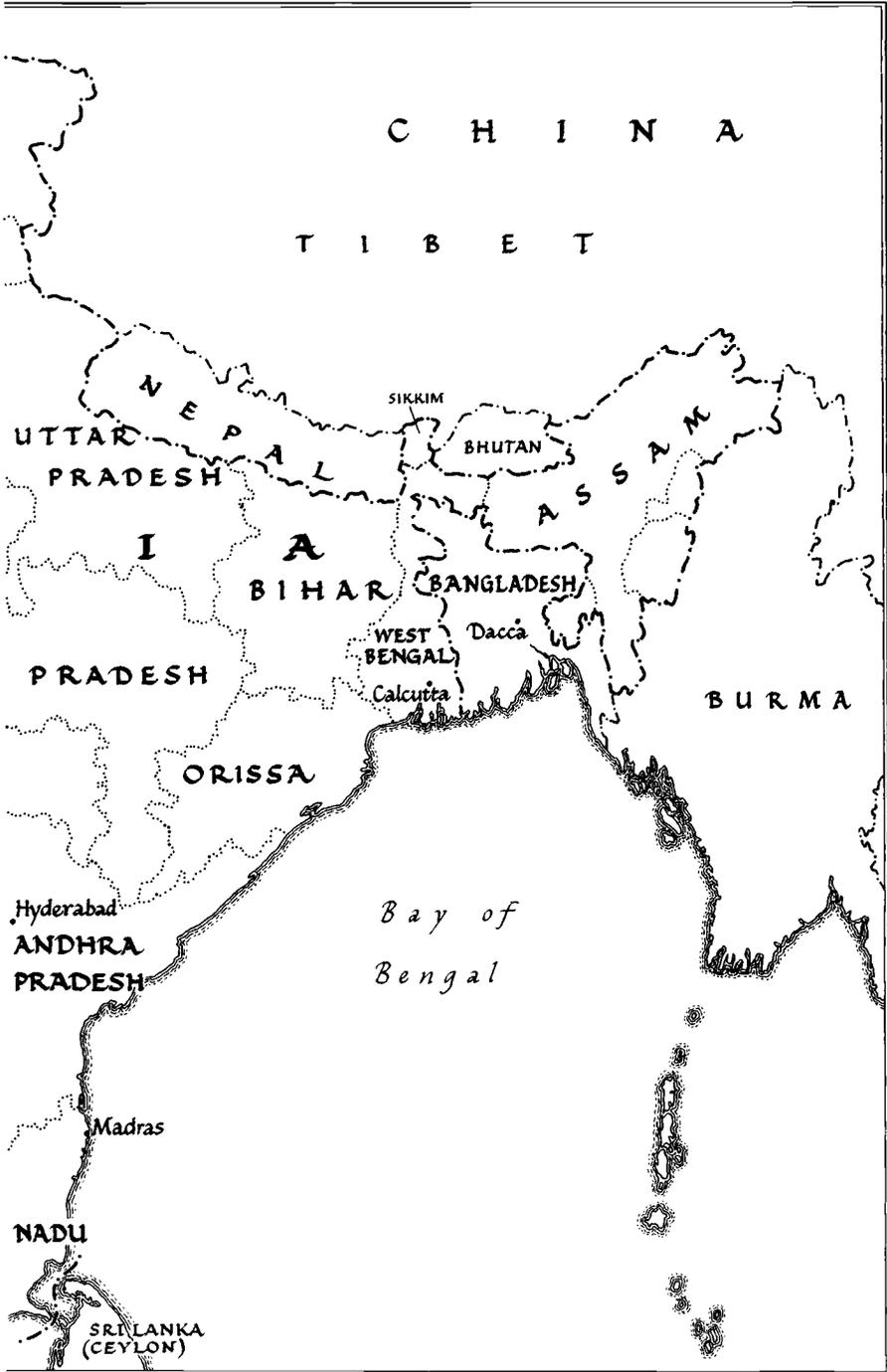
coteries. It is the politics of this dialectic of hopes and fears which lend the terms populism and anti-populist reaction a measure of both substance and meaning. Many populist leaders emerged from within structures of state power, whose institutional efficacy and legitimacy was either eroded or eroding, to satisfy the manifold demands being raised in the expanding mass arenas of politics. Populism, therefore, can be only profitably analysed in the specific historical context of the interplay between state structures and political processes.

In India attempts were made to correct the Congress's descent into an oligarchical form of politics resting on regional party bosses through a populist mobilization of those occupying the lower rungs of the social order. Pakistan emerged from over a decade of depoliticization under military rule and a bloody civil war which marked the breakaway of its eastern wing and the establishment of Bangladesh. The Pakistan People's Party and the Awami League in Bangladesh were faced with the task of channelling populist expectations which had played such a key part in the dismantling of the military regimes of Generals Ayub and Yahya.

This chapter examines the factors that powered the populist currents in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh and the reasons why before the end of the decade they not only ran out of steam but exacerbated the authoritarian strains which had always bedeviled their state structures. One of its main premises is that the failure of populism is inexplicable without reference to the structural imperatives, both internal and external, of existing states and political economies in the South Asian subcontinent. Analysts of populism in the region have concentrated on teasing out the personal motivations and choices of key politicians like Indira Gandhi, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The emphasis on the role of the individual has something to do with the very nature of populism – devoid as it is of a coherent class-based ideology or organization – but at best gives a partial view of the conjuncture in which populist politics were attempted, amended and ultimately abandoned. Populism's moment in subcontinental history has also been attributed to its inherent limitations as a political strategy. Couched in generalities aimed at appealing to the 'poor' and disempowered citizenry across regional and linguistic divisions, populist programmes have tended to lack the specificity of purpose and solidity of organized support necessary to force the pace of redistributive reforms. Yet as the preceding analysis has suggested, recourse to populism in each of the three countries was resorted to by elements already situated within the cloisters of power in the face of wide socio-economic developments that had given rise to new and insistent political demands and challenges from below. Moreover, it is one thing to point to the tactical errors of populist politics and quite another to fault its strategic goal of redistributive reforms. The practical difficulties



2 Political divisions of South Asia, 1972



2 Political divisions of South Asia, 1972

of effectively mobilizing a disparate cross-section of society, consisting of some ensconced as well as newly mobilized groups, against existing structures of dominance and privilege is far greater than has been given credence. So it might be more meaningful to examine the limited potential of populism as a historical phenomenon at the contextual rather than the purely personal or conceptual level.

Assessing how the imperatives of existing states and political economies served to constrain the manoeuvrability of self-professedly populist parties and politicians is a necessary antidote to the overemphasis on individual leaders. This is not to deny the role of human motivation and choice. But it is only by focusing on the interstices of human agency and structural possibility that one can gain a sense of the opportunities, real or apparent, afforded by populist politics. It is perhaps the exaggerated sense of opportunity presented by populism that has made it such a difficult process to evaluate and tainted interpretations of its authoritarian aftermath, mostly covert in India and overt in Pakistan and Bangladesh. A reconsideration of populism followed by a comparative assessment of the qualitative changes in the state-society dialectic from the late seventies to the present might help explain the reasons for the paradoxically analogous results of democratic processes and military authoritarianism in the three countries.

Indira Gandhi and Indian 'populism'

In January 1966 the 'syndicate' bosses who had come to control the Congress party organization after Nehru's death in 1964 selected Mrs Gandhi as their prime ministerial candidate, certain of keeping her at their beck and call. But against the backdrop of soaring prices, food shortages and unemployment, lower income groups in the various regions had been withdrawing their political loyalties to the Congress. The main beneficiaries of the Congress's eroding social base of support were political parties, both to the left and the right, that were able to fuse the appeal of populism with regionalism. Although the two wings of the Communist Party of India, the CPI and the CPI(Marxist), as well as the Jan Sangh claimed all-India status, their support was essentially regional in nature. All three had made considerable organizational strides at the Congress's expense since the 1962 elections. In addition, there was a flood of defections from the Congress just before and after the 1967 elections, including that of key regional leaders like Charan Singh in UP, Ajoy Mukherjee in West Bengal, Rao Birendra Singh in Haryana and Govind Narain Singh in Madhya Pradesh. The formation of united fronts against the Congress served to reduce opposition fragmentation, the single most important factor in ensuring one-party dominance in an effectively multi-party system. In a dramatically changing

political arena, big business too appeared to be hedging its bets. Between 1961 and 1964 the Congress's share of political donations by business interests was approximately 85 per cent; by the time of the 1967 elections it had dropped to 73.7 per cent. The right-wing Swatantra party was the second major recipient of contributions by private limited companies, increasing its share of the total from 13.6 to 25.2 per cent in the same years.¹

Congress's veneer was visibly fading. The results of the 1967 general elections registered an embarrassing defeat for the Congress in eight states. A larger number of candidates in the fray and a greater voter turnout pointed to the intensification of political competition and growing participation in the electoral process. If the limitations of the Congress's social bases of support had begun to pinch, the statistical figures masked the extent of the discomfort. There was a marginal drop in the total vote cast in favour of Congress candidates for the Lok Sabha, from 45 per cent in 1962 to 41 per cent in 1967. In state assembly elections, Congress's proportion of voter support fell to 42 per cent, down more than 3 per cent from 1962.²

Yet there were some optimistic signs in this otherwise gloomy scenario. The voting patterns were far too varied to suggest a fundamental rejection of Congress ideology, whether the commitment to centralized authority, secularism or even socialism. In states like Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan and Gujarat the voters had opted for scions of princely families. Communists had been the choice in West Bengal and Kerala while Hindu communalists found favour in the towns and cities of the north Indian heartland. Parties promising populist reforms and contesting the centre's Hindi-only policy came out on top in the south. None of the opposition groupings, including the communists, had scored their successes through a new style of politics. They had at best modified Congress's well-trying method of vertical patterns of mobilization with rural bigwigs who commanded the allegiance of castes and powerful local factions.

These were all indicators of the potential for a Congress revival at the next hustings. Though cut down to size, the Congress was still the only party with a national following. The sheer variety of regional political patterns combined with a general heightening of social conflict along class and caste lines had serious ramifications for political stability at the state level. Violations of parliamentary norms and constitutional powers in many states took on alarming proportions almost as soon as the election results were announced. This guaranteed a continued role for central authority in the person of the state governor, the non-elected kingmaker in the politics of fluidity that marked the terrain in many non-Congress dominated states. So

¹ Bhambhri, *Bureaucracy and Politics in India*, p.29.

² Francine Frankel, *India's Political Economy, 1947-1977: the Gradual Revolution*, Princeton, 1978, p. 353.

despite the visible lunge towards regionalism recorded in the 1967 electoral results, the implications for state politics gave Congress at the centre plenty of opportunities to try and best its rivals.

For Indira Gandhi there were other silver linings to the clouds. The failure of the party bosses to deliver the vote banks released her from the awkward position of being a pliant instrument of powerful regional patrons. It was convenient that some of her more redoubtable rivals like K. Kamaraj Nadar, S. K. Patil and Atulya Ghosh had gone down in defeat. With her eventual triumph over the old syndicate bosses now imminent, Mrs Gandhi began considering ways of turning Congress's present weaknesses into future strengths. The results of the 1967 elections had made it plain to those occupying positions at the political centre that the challenge of regionalism was now being posed by political forces outside the pale of the Congress. A simple partnership with the civil bureaucracy was no longer sufficient to maintain Congress hegemony or central authority. Assisted by an inner cabinet consisting of experienced and trusted bureaucrats, Indira Gandhi set about the task of restoring the sagging political fortunes of the Congress with alacrity. Noting the distinct radicalization of the social base along class, caste, tribal and linguistic lines, she opted for an explicitly populist socio-economic programme. In June 1969 Mrs Gandhi deftly outmanoeuvred the party bosses by supporting an independent, V. V. Giri, for party president against the official Congress candidate, Sanjiva Reddy. By November 1969 Mrs Gandhi was endorsing leftist political positions within the party articulated by the Congress Forum for Socialist Action. Mohan Kumaramangalam, a former communist, became her key political and economic strategist.

The tactical shift in the Congress's electoral strategy followed naturally. Since intermediate castes and classes, notably the big farmers and the middle to richer peasants, formed the principal power base of the opposition to the Congress at the state level, the aim was to link the top and bottom layers of agrarian society by buttressing the waning political clout of high caste, old landed elites and by professing to champion the common interests of subordinate castes and classes which transcended local and regional arenas. This was done by ridding the Congress of the oligarchical deadwood in 1969 without damaging the old connections forged by the political centre with the civil bureaucracy, the police, the military and sizeable fractions of the industrial capitalist class.

After the Congress split in 1969 Mrs Gandhi formed a minority government with the support of the Communist Party of India and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam. She also sought alliances with populist leaders in the states. In Karnataka she cast aside Nijalangappa, an old Congress hand who had the support of the higher castes, in favour of Devaraj Urs who had the backing of the Harijans or the scheduled castes. In Gujarat, which had been

the stronghold of her most rebarbative rival among the syndicate bosses, Morarji Desai, Mrs Gandhi began mobilizing support among the lower castes – Khasatriyas, Harijans, Adivasis and the Muslims – a policy that came to be known in the later 1970s as the KHAM strategy. The critical electoral state of Uttar Pradesh provides the best illustration of her strategy of linking the top and the bottom layers. Here she depended on H. N. Bahuguna who had a following among Harijans and Muslims and higher castes like the Rajput Thakurs and the Brahmins to do down the erstwhile Congress boss Charan Singh, who had the backing of middle castes such as the Kurmis and Ahirs in eastern UP and Jat farmers in western UP. A similar strategy was adopted in other states, for instance Andhra Pradesh in the south.

Efforts to deepen the Congress's social bases of support were matched by a series of left-leaning policy measures. These included the nationalization of banks in 1969, steps to check the further concentration of wealth in the hands of the larger industrial houses through a more restricted licensing policy and the abolition of privy purses to princely families. In January 1970 Jagjivan Ram, a Harijan, was slotted in as Congress president and the working committee reiterated the goal of turning the party into an effective instrument of social transformation. Special advisory committees and cells were created within the Congress to monitor the problems facing minorities, scheduled castes, backward classes and industrial labour. But these plans, noble in prospectus, were in sharp contrast to the actual disarray of state and district units following the Congress split. To obviate the problem the working committee extended the office terms of all Congress committees and officers for a year and authorized the state Congress committees to fill the vacancies. In what was an indication of things to come Mrs Gandhi began appointing favoured men as chief ministers, a departure from the established norm of selecting those who had the support of state assembly parties. After 1971, elections to state Congress committees and their offices, especially the post of president, were superseded by direct appointments by the All-India Congress president. Weaknesses of Congress party organization and the ensuing loss of legitimacy at the local levels were matched by an onslaught against the Congress's new populist directions led by the Indian judiciary. Claiming the inviolability of fundamental rights, the supreme court issued a series of judgements which slammed the brakes on Mrs Gandhi's policy of bank nationalization and abolition of privy purses. These judicial checks on executive directed legislative action, even if cast in a conservative mould, underline a feature of the institutional balance within the Indian state that was conspicuous by its absence in neighbouring Pakistan.

It was against this background that Indira Gandhi decided to put her populist alliance building to the electoral test. In 1971 she called a snap

election and for the first time instituted the policy of delinking elections to the central and state assemblies. The bifurcation of national and state political arenas was intended to release the Congress's national fortunes from state issues and regional bosses which had worked to its disadvantage in the 1967 elections. By holding elections to the Lok Sabha before the state elections Mrs Gandhi was trying to push the pendulum in favour of the centre where her personal stature and the populist slogan of *garibi hatao* would ensure Congress's success. A strong majority at the centre would better place the Congress to influence the course of state elections. But while giving the Congress at the all-India level more room to manoeuvre, the long-term effects of this structural change in the Indian political system was to make local politics more autonomous from national politics.

For now Mrs Gandhi's socio-economic programme and alliance with populist leaders in the states produced handsome dividends in the 1971 parliamentary and 1972 state elections. The simple but loaded slogan *garibi hatao* appeared to do the conjurer's trick. The Congress won a two-thirds majority in the Lok Sabha and polled 43 per cent of the popular vote. The state assembly elections, hot on the heels of India's successful military intervention in East Pakistan, also registered a resounding success for the Congress (Ruling) led by Indira Gandhi. But it was easier to win the elections than to translate the Congress's populist programme into practice. The implications of Congress's new populist directions, especially at the level of regional political economies, threatened to leave Mrs Gandhi high and dry at the centre. In choosing to ally with populist regional leaders to do down the syndicate, Mrs Gandhi had underestimated the resilience of old rural power structures. Still ensconced in regional political economies, the erstwhile Congress bosses were ready and able to mobilize their middle to richer peasant supporters – many of whom had penetrated the state police and civil service – to blunt the edge of a centrally backed populist challenge. The inability of Congress state ministries to push through their populist programmes or govern effectively in Bihar and Gujarat is a comment on the strength of dominant castes and classes in withstanding attacks mounted by the leaders of emergent and newly empowered subordinate castes and classes. Above all, it underlines the continuing autonomy of regional political economies in the face of a seemingly omnipotent and centralized Indian state structure.

Mrs Gandhi's failure to cash in on the Congress's electoral gains had much to do with her anxieties about the potentially constraining effects of autonomous regional political economies on the centralized structures of decision-making in India. Rebuilding the Congress organization on the basis of her new and broader-based electoral alliances promised to considerably enhance, not diminish, the power of popular regional leaders in

extracting concessions from the centre. So even where the new populism was relatively successful, as in the key state of Uttar Pradesh between 1972 and 1975, the central executive began to eye state level populist leaders and organizations with suspicion. Men like Bahuguna and Chandra Shekhar in UP and Devaraj Urs in Karnataka were seen as potential claimants to power at the centre on the basis of their populist mobilization in the states. The response, short-sighted though it may have been, was to completely abandon any semblance of inner-party democracy within the Congress and to hoist state and local leaders from the top.

Yet events which have been explained mainly in terms of Indira Gandhi's flawed leadership qualities, and more specifically her personal paranoia, are more meaningfully analysed in the context of the structural contradictions within the Indian state structure and economy. The dramatic hike in international oil prices in 1973 was a particularly bad piece of timing for incipient populist experiments in all three countries of the South Asian subcontinent. It worsened India's already precarious balance of payments position and sent shock waves throughout the economy. Rising prices, food shortages, industrial stagnation and massive unemployment, especially among college graduates, led to street protests and outbreaks of violence in many parts of the country. International economic pressures compounded Congress's difficulties in delivering on its electoral promises and widened the organizational cracks in district and state level units. With the notion of a strong centre as the concomitant of Indian unity and national weal ingrained in her political philosophy, Mrs Gandhi responded by further concentrating powers in her own hands. While the attractions of ruling by diktat hastened the institutional atrophy of the Congress party underway since the Nehru era, the process should be attributed less to quirks in her personality than to the imperatives of sustaining the centralized character of the Indian state structure.

What is clear is that the continued exercise of executive power from the centre was directly at odds with the demonstrated resilience of dominant castes and the potential problems which populist power could pose at the level of regional political economies. The age-old dialectic between centralism and regionalism in Indian history had come to assume new dimensions with the deepening and widening of the political process. Mobilizing ever larger segments of the unprivileged strata without the will or the ability to actuate qualitative changes in their socio-economic predicament was redefining politics in ways which severely tested the institutional capacities of a centralized state structure. It was the disjunction between state posturing from above and multiple social changes below that created the conditions for personalized rule and the politics of deinstitutionalization. Mrs Gandhi's efforts to counter regional challenges bore a striking similarity to

the policies of the colonial and the military dominated Pakistani states, albeit with rather different consequences in a society accustomed by now to using its democratic right to turn out unpopular parties and leaders from electoral office.

Amidst growing popular disenchantment and an intensification of the opposition's efforts to dislodge her government, Mrs Gandhi raised the spectre of internal and external conspiracies against the state. The equation of national integrity and unity with Congress rule at the centre was a well-rehearsed line to legitimize coercive state action. In March 1974 Jayaprakash Narayan, a highly venerated Gandhian socialist popularly known as JP, had stepped in to give a fillip to the opposition's movement in Bihar and soon became the acknowledged leader of a nation-wide Indira *hatao* campaign. In a volley of singeing attacks, JP held Mrs Gandhi directly responsible for the rampant corruption in the country and dubbed her rule authoritarian. Mrs Gandhi for her part accused JP of conniving with the Hindu Jan Sangh and the American CIA. At a time when she was finding it difficult to retain the upper hand in an acrimonious political debate with a strong opposition, the Allahabad high court's ruling invalidating her election from Rai Bareilly in 1971 on account of the misuse of government machinery came as a bolt from the dark.

By resorting to the emergency on 26 June 1975 the besieged prime minister hoped to clip the opposition's wings by deflecting both sorts of regional challenges and projecting the centre as the only source of supra-local and supra-state populist programmes. This mode of bolstering central authority through an overt authoritarianism based on pressing the civil, police and military institutions of the state in the service of the ruling party more blatantly than ever appeared to work reasonably well only in the short term. Called upon to implement unpopular policies, non-elected officials resented being tarred by the brush of popular antipathy towards Mrs Gandhi's government. The worst excesses of the emergency, and certainly the best remembered, were associated with her son Sanjay Gandhi's thoughtless and highhanded activities in the name of population control and urban beautification. Sanjay's programme of forced vasectomies and clearing the capital of its slums targeted the poor and lowly, leading the wits to comment that having failed to get rid of poverty the Congress had taken to getting rid of the poor.

With the growing alienation of the non-elected institutions of the state – especially members of the civil bureaucracy, the police and the judiciary – as well as the subordinate groups in northern India which had rallied to the populist programmes of the Congress since 1969, the option of overt authoritarianism was swept aside in the 1977 elections. The formally democratic nature of the Indian state had reasserted itself against Mrs Gandhi's

new, if ultimately misguided, populist directions and, more emphatically, her brief flirtation with overt authoritarianism.

Bhuttoism or populism? The case of Pakistan

There are many fascinating parallels between Indira Gandhi's and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's populist experiments. Both have been accused of personalizing power, mauling the institutions of the state and subverting the populist dream. Yet these charges reveal less and obscure more. Even the most imaginative exercise in counterfactual history would be hard pressed to prove the success of populism in India and Pakistan in the absence of an Indira Gandhi or a Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. To lose sight of the context in which the two played their respective populist cards is to mistake jokers for the missing aces. Both rose to the commanding heights despite being closely associated with the discredited dispensations populism was seeking to displace. Both drew their main political appeal from links with the structures of the old world rather than any demonstrated personal qualities or ideological commitment that might have helped usher in a new world of populism. A comparison of Mrs Gandhi and Bhutto underlines the ways in which the existing structures of the Indian and Pakistani states and political economies not only ensured their emergence to power but continued to delimit their manoeuvrability and, by extension, the parameters of their populist policies.

Contrary to the prevalent view, the post-1971 Pakistani state structure was only marginally different from the one preceding it. The institutional imbalance within the state remained substantially unchanged despite the assumption of presidential office by an elected leader backed by a party with bases of support in two of the four remaining provinces. On the face of it, rampant anti-bureaucratic sentiment coupled with the humiliation of the army provided a perfect opening to tilt the institutional balance against the non-elected institutions of the state. But the legacies of military rule had greatly reduced such prospects as existed for genuine grassroots political party organizations. In contrast to India where populism has been presented both as the cause and effect of political deinstitutionalization, in Pakistan the scope for party building suffered from prolonged bouts of direct state intervention in the political process. As the 1970 electoral results had shown, political horizons in Pakistan had become even more regionally fragmented than before. Worse still, the personal influence of candidates at the level of the constituency mattered more than their adherence to specific socio-economic policies at the national level.

Yet Ayub's so-called decade of development had released a plethora of energies frustrated by a consistent trend towards the political and economic