The People's Party Vs. the Punjab "Feudalists"

CRAIG BAXTER

U.S. Department of State and the United States Military Academy, West Point, U.S.A.

In its Manifesto issued prior to the 1970 elections, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) led by Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto reiterated one of its "programmatic principles" by declaring "the party stands for elimination of feudalism and will take concrete steps in accordance with the established principles of socialism to protect and advance the interests of the peasantry" (1970:29). The manifesto reviewed the land reforms of the Ayub era and criticized them: "Since it was legally permitted, the feudal landowner divided the excess [i.e., land above the permissible ceiling] among the members of his family...in most parts of West Pakistan the feudal owners live in a social system of castes, caste-clans and surviving traditions of joint families. Thus even with his estate divided in this manner, the feudal lord retains his power" (1970:28). To the PPP the "feudal lords constitute a formidable obstacle to progress. Not only by virtue of their wealth, but on account of their hold over their tenants and the neighbouring peasantry, they wield considerable power and are, even at present, a major political force" (1970:28).

The words "even at present" assume, at least in the eyes of the PPP, the existence of feudal political power in the past. It is the purpose of this article to explore the importance of the major landlords in the Punjab in the political system of the province since the introduction of reforms in 1919 and to look at the impact of the PPP on them in the 1970 election. In the pre-independence period the study will be limited to the Muslim seats in the territory which became part of Pakistan after the partition of 1947. The use of the essentially perjorative terms "feudalism", "landlordism" and similar words and their derivatives by opponents of the traditional leadership of the rural areas will not be challenged here, although the present writer does not subscribe fully to such use. An alternative term might well be "squirearchy", under which the local squires performed political roles in which they both protected and defended their own high estate and legislated, perhaps paternalistically, to improve the conditions of the agrarian population in general, or at least those who owned the land they tilled.

What ever may be the correct term the PPP call for land reform was not original. The party which has been credited with furthering the interests of large landlords, the Unionist Party of pre-partition Punjab, was itself founded to protect the small as well as the large landowner, primarily against the urban
(and largely Hindu) commercial and money lending groups. The Muslim League, following closely the program of the Congress Party, called for the break up of large zamindari holdings and a moderate program of land reform in both the 1936 and 1946 elections. More equitable distribution of land was again in the Muslim League manifesto in the 1951 Punjab election. And as we have already noted the 1958 revolution of Ayub Khan included among its basic tenets a revision of the land holding patterns in West Pakistan. The 1951 Muslim League received and the 1958 revolution seized a mandate for reform but neither carried out a program to the extent demanded by the PPP. The party of President Bhutto now has that mandate. Its exercise of the mandate is beyond the scope of this article but it can be noted that, using continuing martial law powers, the new president has announced a land reform program.

**Unionist Domination**

The Government of India Act, 1919, usually known as the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms, introduced major changes in the administration of the provinces of British India. Now a majority of the members of the provincial Legislative Council would be elected and, while the principle of executive responsibility to the Council was not granted, the Council would have expanded control over the acts of the executive. Additionally, the executive departments were divided into two categories: one group, concerned with fiscal and law and order matters, would remain under the jurisdiction of the Governor and would be administered by officially appointed executive councillors; the second, concerned primarily with "nation-building" subjects, would be transferred to ministers appointed by the Governor from among the elected members of the Council. The new system, "dyarchy", would almost inevitably lead to the formation of parties, informally or formally, either within or outside of the Council. The ambiguous position of the Congress on "council entry" meant that in most provinces parties other than the Congress took the lead and these parties generally were formed first within the Council and later extended their activities outside by organizing in order to present a common electoral front. The franchise was severely restricted with eligibility based primarily on property ownership and income qualifications. Constituencies were divided into general (i.e., territorial) and special, the latter including seats for such groups as landholders, university graduates and industrial and commercial interests. The territorial constituencies were divided in two manners: first, seats were assigned to various communities in a system of separate electorates in accordance with the Lucknow Pact between the Muslim League and the Congress in 1916; and, secondly, within the communal allotments seats were assigned to urban and rural electorates.

In the Punjab a total of 64 members of the Council were to be elected from territorial constituencies and seven more from special constituencies. The 64 general seats were divided into twenty non-Muhammadan (seven urban and