

Fatima Jinnah: quest for democracy

By Sharif al Mujahid

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DURING the 1950s and the 1960s the one figure that had carved for itself an enduring place in our national history was Mohtarma Fatima Jinnah, the Quaid's sister. What she stood and worked for, and what she accomplished, constitute a part of our national heritage.

It beckons us to the pristine principles that had impelled the demand for Pakistan, inspired the strivings and sacrifices in its quest, and enabled the beleaguered nation to establish it, despite heavy odds. Indeed, the values that Fatima Jinnah exemplified in her lifetime are still relevant to us.

They are relevant because in those decades, she stood as the symbol as well as the foremost advocate of the cherished principles which the Quaid had stood and fought and died for. And by them she, in turn, had herself stood with courage and determination till her rather tragic end, whatever the circumstances, whatever the costs and whatever the consequences.

Perhaps none was able to so succinctly sum up this ennobling aspect of her life as did Malik Jilani in his tribute on her demise. In his words, "she had her hour of loneliness, her hour of despair and her long hour of distress and yet her courage never failed her. Her voice never faltered. Her spirit was never overtaken by weariness. She had the strength of those who lived for great principles, silent endurance of those whom the world needs."

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Nazimuddin the governor-general.

She was obviously chagrined, and so was the nation. Her riposte was characteristic of her: she decided never again to use the government-controlled medium. Henceforth, her views were generally expressed through her press statements and messages on six important occasions during the year: two Eids, Independence Day and Pakistan Day and the Quaid's birth and death anniversaries. The nation looked forward to her statements and messages. Clearly,

Fatima Jinnah's 120th birth anniversary is being observed today.

they were often critical of the power that be. Her minatory role which often brought her into clash with the powers that be, was widely appreciated.

Donning the role of a warner and guide was by no means an easy task. But for this critical role she was eminently suited and she played it out with courage and conviction. This was made possible for her by her strength of mind and character and her steadfast attachment to the lofty principles she had

which carried her from Dhaka to Chittagong, took more than 28 hours to cover 196 miles of the journey, normally covered in just about seven hours.

And all the time Miss Jinnah was up, responding to the demonstrations of support from the surging crowds at stations, big and small. Indeed, the inexhaustible energy, stamina and determination she displayed during the hectic election campaign surprised almost everyone, friend and foe alike. All through the campaign, her message was loud and clear: she was struggling to restore to the people their right to choose their rulers directly and in free and fair elections.

Thus, she stood apart as a towering figure, feeling the pulse of the people, articulating their hopes and aspirations, and reflecting their sense of disconsolation that had disfigured Pakistan's political landscape during the 1960s.

Equally important was the fact that but for her candidature that first presidential elections in Pakistan would not have assumed the significance they did, nor the campaign conducted on a national level. Indeed, it is to Miss Jinnah's eternal credit that she never let the campaign degenerate into a cacophonic raving of parochial, provincial and petty issues as it usually happens in multi-racial, multi-lingual, politically fragmented and economically disparate societies, and as it did in the 1970 fateful general elections. Indeed, her candidature had helped forge an integrated East-West opposition plank, despite the simmering secessionist tendencies in East Pakistan. Thus, as against President Ayub's repeated claim, Miss Jinnah's candidature had helped the cause of national integration rather than disintegration.

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Her steadfast adherence to principles, her courage of conviction, her strength of character, her indomitable spirit and her incredible powers of endurance — these qualities, though they must should have been latent in her for a long while, came to public notice only after Jinnah's death when she assumed a more active role in the country's affairs.

Till then, she was content to live in the shadow of her illustrious brother, unassuming, somewhat cloistered except when she accompanied him, and working behind the scene, nursing and tending him when he was sick, looking after his comforts, and sustaining him during his onerous struggle for Pakistan. Not surprisingly, this role earned for her public acclamation from Jinnah himself. "Miss Fatima Jinnah is a constant source of help and encouragement to me. In the days when I was expecting to be taken as a prisoner by the British government, it was my sister who encouraged me, and said hopeful things when a revolution was staring me in the face. My sister was like a bright ray of light and hope whenever I came home and met her", Jinnah, who otherwise seldom gave public expression to his private feelings, told the guests at the first official dinner, hosted by Ghulam Husain Hidayatullah, premier and governor-designate of Sindh, at the Karachi Club, on August 9, 1947.

Initially, Fatima Jinnah's public role was confined to a few appearances at various functions, mostly related to education, health, women's upliftment, Girls' Guides (of which she was the founder), women's community work and industrial homes, other social welfare activities, and students' welfare and messages on important occasions. On September 11, 1951, her broadcast was tampered with by the radio authorities, with the microphones going silent for a few minutes when she was a little critical of the drift and indecision that had characterized the then government policies. At that time, Liaquat Ali Khan was the prime minister and Khwaja



imbibed from her distinguished brother. If the people listened and responded to her, it was not primarily because she was the Quaid's sister, but because, amidst the wreckage of ideals all around, she alone represented certain ideals and values which they cherished themselves and which hundreds of thousands of them had staked their lives for in the years gone by.

Equally important, in moments of despair, her voice rose, above the din of noise official rhetoric and rosy pledges, to lift the drooping spirit of the general populace. While striking terror in the seats of unholy power, it instilled courage in the hearts of the frustrated masses, confirming them in their democratic quest and enkindling hope about the ultimate triumph of their democratic destiny. It was thus that Fatima Jinnah came to represent the hopes and aspirations of the people.

Her minatory role and political activism finally climaxed in her entry into active politics when she accepted the Combined Opposition Parties' nomination on September 16, 1964, in the ensuing presidential elections. For now, she had decided to take on Field Marshal Mohammad Ayub Khan, despite his being a formidable candidate and an entrenched president under his own system. Though seemingly unexpected, this decision was in consonance with her previous role and her mettle.

As she had promised while accepting the nomination, Fatima Jinnah spared nothing. She was on the campaign trail for three long months. She was in processions for hours on end. She subjected herself to the exacting rigours of addressing mammoth meetings in cities and towns, wayside gatherings on her whistle stop tours, and milling crowds at railway stations during her long train journeys, in both East and West Pakistan. She travelled endlessly. The Green Arrow, East Pakistan's fastest express train,

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that despite the serious disabilities and built-in handicaps under which she conducted her campaign and fought the elections under her opponent's system, she could still muster up 28,691 (36.4 per cent) votes of the Basic Democrats, and carry three out of sixteen divisions — Karachi, Dhaka and Chittagong — and that against a well-entrenched president and in a system geared to the vested interests of the incumbent.

Thus, even in her "defeat" she brought home a basic lesson to the powers that be. She demonstrated that the country wanted to engage in critical debate and discussion rather than subscribe to the cult of docile conformism, that without such a dialogue and the requisite climate for various ideas to compete for people's allegiance, democracy would be utterly meaningless. Indeed during the 1960s she alone helped keep the torch of democracy aflame; she alone helped sustain the nation's quest for democracy.

In a historical perspective, the presidential elections represented the middle-point in Ayub's much-trumpeted "development decade"; the beginning of the end. For the first time and on a national plane, the elections exposed the absurdity of the premises of the system, and its shortcomings, as well as the tall claims of its architect. Once this occurred, Ayub, despite his electoral "victory", could not legitimize his own constitution, nor his regime. The moral ground having been prepared and the nation's conscience aroused, it was only a matter of time before the regime and its high priest were swept aside.

The values that Miss Fatima Jinnah exemplified in her life time are still relevant to us. While they provide a source of inspiration to us in our present predicament, her life provides a role model for us.

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