[**Revisiting the 1975 emergency**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1695947/revisiting-the-1975-emergency)

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IT would be 47 years this week since Indira Gandhi imposed her controversial emergency in India on June 25, 1975.

Pakistan has seen a couple or more of those itself, under the military’s watch, mostly. India hasn’t come there yet, but who knows. Ms Gandhi’s authoritarian rule lasted about 20 months, relatively brief against what is regarded as an undeclared emergency in the [advent of Prime Minister Narendra Modi](https://www.dawn.com/news/1108695) in May 2014.

Its two most devastating moments for Pakistan had a global context under Gen Ayub and Gen Zia. Note the similarities with India’s own turbulent moments. Ayub set out to rein in religious bigotry but quickly moved to target communists. Ms Gandhi’s main challenge came from the Hindu right, but she turned her fire swiftly on pro-China communists. Hidden in this equation were international chess moves. Ayub was serving the cause of Pakistan’s Western military pacts. Ms Gandhi was sticking to her pro-Moscow loyalties. See how the pro-Soviet Communist Party of India supported the emergency.

Subsequently, Gen Zia’s coercive steps towards Islamisation of Pakistan and Mr Modi’s current agenda of Hindutva would embrace significant similarities in their domestic and diplomatic approaches. One worked for the Western project with Moscow in the cross hairs. The other had Beijing in its sights. The bigotries of both were ‘tolerated’ with this purpose in view. (Pakistan plays to Indian nationalism’s domestic needs; therefore, bilateral relations are really an extension of that.)

**Read:** [*Hindutva’s wave*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1636613)

There’s a remarkable difference too. Remember what Habib Jalib said in mock praise of Zia: “Apney kharch per hain log qaid tere raaj mein” (such is the lure of your [Zia’s] regime that people love to go to prison at their own expense.) Zia didn’t pay from his pocket for his anti-Soviet services. In fact, he scoffed at American offers of financial support as “peanuts”. He bargained, instead, for a fortune. Arms and money came from abroad. India is shelling out the taxpayer’s hard-earned money for the Western project called Quad, getting only some technological support here and there.

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In hindsight, the coercion Ms Gandhi summoned and the civil liberties she mangled did not really need the self-incriminating fiat that the declaration of the emergency became.

Mr Modi is cruising nicely there without any of the props. He is the new leader with an ideological agenda, which he tested in Gujarat for 12 years before setting it into motion in the country, with roots in street violence and state vendetta.

Comparisons are often made between Ms Gandhi’s Emergency and Mr Modi’s raw authoritarianism. Unlike Ms Gandhi, Mr Modi has seldom invited serious foreign opprobrium, which she did by suspending the constitution and aligning with the USSR in the global chess game. Pro-Moscow Mujibur Rehman was assassinated in Bangladesh later in 1975.

Mr Modi plies piecemeal methods. He also understands that coercion can be achieved more effectively by callous methods that carry their own legitimacy. Modi helps himself also to the huge advantage of not being caught in the Cold War.

Ms Gandhi’s politics was pro-USSR, which opened her to full-throttle criticism and scrutiny from the Western media. Mr Modi faces the occasional censure from abroad for his violence-friendly domestic politics. But, as a recent cover story in *The Economist* hinted, he would be courted nevertheless if he tweaked the economy to accord more seamlessly with neoliberal requirements.

Ms Gandhi’s emergency had several targets in its view. They included the RSS and its adjuncts, such as the Bharatiya Jan Sangh (seen as the original pro-American party), now called the BJP. China-friendly communists and mostly agrarian ‘socialists’ were jailed, as well as right-wing Muslim leaders and former Congress colleagues. Journalists and businessmen, including those who published news critical of the government, were targeted.

Muslim leaders shared prison cells with communist and Hindutva leaders and coalesced into a united force without the unwritten pact getting noticed by prison guards. Muslim leaders and communists are running for cover today, both having lost the plot. Their trust in Hindutva politicians as allies in saving Indian democracy has made them look foolish and naive.

**Read:** [*Indira Gandhi’s many battles*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1293471)

It’s not possible for me to think about the emergency without remembering my friend from JNU, the late Prof Ali Javed, who passed away last year from a brain haemorrhage. Javed was a pro-Moscow communist whose party supported the emergency. It’s another matter that, in doing so, the Communist Party of India unwittingly joined the company of the right-wing Shiv Sena, which too backed Ms Gandhi’s authoritarian measures. There are no surprises here. Congress satraps in Maharashtra had diligently created the militant group (which is ironically a spearhead today against the BJP) to foil and eventually decimate Bombay’s communist-led powerful trade unions.

That Bombay’s communist leaders were largely Brahmin, and the Shiv Sena appealed to the numerically overwhelming peasant-warrior caste, the Marathas, to decide the outcome. The Indian left is only now beginning to accept the dynamics of the Hindu caste system. Early inability to look beyond class struggle, to accept the caste pyramid as a force in Indian politics, was a fatal error.

Ali Javed embodied the contradictions of the left. The predominant political flavour on the JNU campus was anti-emergency. Pro-China student leaders would huddle in darkened hostel rooms to wait for a senior student leader to visit with the ‘party line’. A cyclostyle machine was smuggled in to spread the word, with paint and wall brushes too. Ali Javed hid it all in his room, violating his party line. His room proved to be the safest place to keep scurrilous stuff on campus. As a student of Urdu literature (and later as a professor), Javed used Josh Malihabadi’s lines, translated here, to describe his India in ferment: “Fragrance of the rose, or a morning breeze seems far-fetched if nice/ Given the suffocation, a blast of white heat would suffice.”

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