Book Review

Syed Khawar Mehdi¹, comp., Iskander Mirza: Pakistan’s First Elected President’s Memoirs from Exile (Lightstone Publishers, 2023), pp. 332.

Reviewed by Adnan Aamir¹

The latest book titled Iskander Mirza: Pakistan’s First Elected President’s Memoirs from Exile is a profound and historical document that offers a different and intimate perspective on the critical formative years of Pakistan, challenging popular historical narrative.

This review delves deep into the central themes and revelations in Iskander Mirza’s memoirs, providing an extensive analysis of his role in shaping Pakistan’s early history, the factors that contributed to his political downfall, and the broader historical context in which these events unfolded.

Iskander Mirza,² the fourth and the last Governor-General and the first president of Pakistan, played an instrumental role in converting Pakistan into one unit and formulating Pakistan’s first constitution in 1956, as well as acquisition of Gwadar from Oman, among others. Unfortunately, he is known for setting the precedent of abrogating the constitution by imposing the first martial law in Pakistan in 1958, and making Ayub Khan the army chief and chief martial law administrator (CMLA). Following 20 days of the coup, Mirza was made to resign forcibly while General Ayub Khan assumed full control. The vicious tradition continues to cast shadow on the political landscape of Pakistan up till now.

Mirza has his fair share of criticism for the role that he played while he was at the helm of power. He has been described as the spokesperson for what critics have referred to as the ‘power monger gang’ in Pakistan, a term used to describe his utilization of civil and military bureaucrats to assert

¹ Journalist, Nikkei Asia; Dawn; Researcher with an interest in South-Asian history.

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control over the Pakistani populace. Detractors have attributed to him the responsibility for undermining democracy in Pakistan and involving the military in politics. His imposition of the first martial law in Pakistan was executed with absolute impunity, entailing the suppression of public opinion and assuring of American and British diplomats that Pakistan would be pro-West after Martial Law.

Mirza was known for detesting politicians, democratic governments, and the will of the common people. This is proved by how Mirza defended the imposition of emergency in 1954. He said, ‘[s]ome under-developed countries have to learn democracy and, until they do so, they have to be controlled. With so many illiterate people, politicians could make a mess of things. There was nothing undemocratic in declaring a state of emergency because 95 percent of people welcomed it.’ He further added, “[de]mocracy requires education, tradition, breathing and pride in your ability to do something well.”

The then Prime Minister Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy encountered substantial governance challenges exacerbated by the concept of One Unit and the consistent interference of President Mirza in governmental affairs. Mirza ‘forced his [Suharwardy’s] resignation’ at a juncture when the latter sought to secure a vote of confidence from the parliament to affirm his authority. Additionally, critics attribute to Mirza the sowing of seeds of discontent toward the Pakistani government within the hearts of Bengalis during his autocratic tenure as the governor of East Pakistan in 1954.

Regarding the inception of the book, Iskander Mirza’s memoirs were nearly complete at the time of his death. However, despite his family’s best efforts, these memoirs remained unpublished as a cohesive book. Portions of his writings found their way into Urdu magazines over the years, albeit edited at the editors’ discretion. It was the devoted compilation of Syed Khawar Mehdi, Iskander Mirza’s grand son-in-law, that brought this historical document to light, to dispel some of the controversies that shrouded Mirza, and ‘clearing his name and presenting the facts as they are without any bias or hidden agenda as a befitting recognition and tribute to a man who gave his very best to Quaid-e-Azam and Pakistan with unflinching loyalty and devotion’ (pp.16). Mehdi spent five years compiling the memoirs, ensuring their veracity by cross-referencing the content with various archives and libraries.
The primary objective behind the compilation of this book was to allow Iskander Mirza to defend his legacy in his voice through his memoirs. His diaries had been destroyed by the state, leaving him without a voice to set the record straight. Over the years, Mirza had been vilified by the state, media, and the intelligentsia, and this book aims to rectify this historical injustice.

Regarding early academic and political career of Mirza, his early life and education were followed by a military education at Sandhurst and service in the British Indian Army during World War I (WWI). After the war, he transitioned into the civil service and held various administrative positions in the colonial administration.

Mirza’s memoirs vividly depict his efforts to address challenges while serving as a bureaucrat in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, formerly known as Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP), including the management of anti-Bolshevik propaganda in Khyber Agency and the utilization of informants to disrupt the Red Shirts movement (1930-1931), led by Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, a follower of Mahatma Gandhi. The events that followed offer a glimpse into the intricate and sometimes ruthless nature of tactics used by the British Raj to suppress political dissent and resistance.

Iskander Mirza’s memoirs encompass various central themes that shed light on Pakistan’s early history and the challenges and opportunities it faced during its formative years. One of the most significant themes is the question of leadership and governance in a newly formed nation-state. Mirza reflects on the challenges of governing a diverse and complex country like Pakistan and offers insights into how these challenges can be addressed.

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of Mirza’s memoir is the revelations about the inner workings of the Pakistani government and the political intrigues that characterized the early years of the republic. He provides candid assessments, though some are rather controversial, of prominent figures such as Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Liaquat Ali Khan, and Ayub Khan. Moreover, he reflects on his own political mistakes and regrets too, rendering a balance to the composition of the book.

In this context, Mirza recounts that Jinnah believed demonstrating ‘Muslim anger’ was necessary to prevent the British from handing over the country to Congress. Mirza’s role in this mission is significant, as according to his account, he was entrusted by Jinnah to enter tribal territories and ‘start a jihad’ if negotiations for Pakistan failed, ‘if Pakistan was not conceded by
negotiation, we must fight (pp.95). His meeting with the Khan of Kalat, who extended an invitation, adds an intriguing dimension to this narrative. While these plans did not materialize because Jinnah asked Mirza to call off the proposed Jihad in May 1947, they provide insights into the political maneuvering that characterized the struggle for Pakistan’s independence.

Mirza recalls a conversation with Jinnah when the latter was Governor-General, where he requested considerate treatment for Muslim Leaguers, given their pivotal role in independence. ‘Who told you the Muslim League brought in Pakistan? I brought in Pakistan - with my stenographer,’ said Jinnah who had ‘no illusions about the Muslim League’ (pp. 97). The response of Jinnah, asserting exclusive credit for Pakistan’s creation, offers valuable insight into the dynamics within the leadership of that era.

Additionally, the memoir discusses the British government’s urgency to honor its commitment to India during the pre-independence period. Viceroy Lord Wavell’s refusal to expedite the process due to the potential for bloodshed resulted in his replacement by Lord Mountbatten, who oversaw the swift but tumultuous partition of India.

Mirza’s personal experience as Joint Secretary of Defense highlights the strategic decisions taken during the partition. He concentrated essential weapons and ammunition in the arsenal at Ferozpur, anticipating that Ferozpur would become part of Pakistan. However, when the Radcliffe Commission awarded Ferozpur to India, Pakistan was left without an arsenal, highlighting the uncertainties and challenges during this period.

The memoir further delves into the selection of Pakistan’s first army chief. General Douglas Gracey initially recommended General Iftikhar to assume this role. However, the government decided to send General Iftikhar to the Imperial Defense College in London for further grooming. On his way to England from Lahore via Karachi, his plane crashed. Later, General Ayub Khan was nominated as the next army chief—a decision which had far-reaching consequences for Pakistan’s military and political landscape.

It is still a matter of debate that if General Iftikhar had not died in a plane crash and taken charge as Pakistan’s first indigenous army chief, would Pakistan be on a different trajectory altogether? This book does not answer this question.
In October 1955, Mirza became the fourth Governor-General of Pakistan. He writes in his memoirs that the cabinet selected him for this job. Other historical accounts suggest that Mirza maneuvered his way into the top office of the then-dominion of Pakistan.

Mirza’s memoir also delves into the contentious issue of the ‘One-Unit’ policy, aimed at consolidating various provinces into larger administrative units. His attempts to appoint a Lieutenant Governor for Balochistan and NWFP faced vehement opposition from politicians in Punjab, underlining regional and political tensions in early Pakistan. Mirza defended the One-Unit scheme in his book, which later proved to lay the groundwork for the disintegration of East Pakistan in 1971.

In 1956, Pakistan adopted a new constitution that established a parliamentary system of government. Mirza was elected as the first president of Pakistan under this new constitution. His presidency was a tumultuous one, and he remains a controversial figure in Pakistani history. However, his memoir is an essential read for anyone who wants to understand the early years of Pakistan’s nationhood.

The memoir touches upon the roles of key political figures in Pakistan’s early history, notably the Khan of Kalat and General Ayub Khan. It portrays the Khan of Kalat’s rebellion attempt in 1958 and the subsequent abrogation of the constitution, which paved the way for General Ayub Khan’s ascent to power. This memoir provides a narrative that differs from the Khan of Kalat’s account, offering a distinct perspective on the events of that time.

The relationship between Iskander Mirza and General Ayub Khan, who would later become Pakistan’s second President, is also discussed, adding depth to the understanding of the power dynamics within the nascent state of Pakistan. It also seeks to challenge Ayub Khan’s account of history as well as the ‘dimming’ of Mirza in former’s memoirs, *Friends Not Masters: A Political Autobiography* (1967)\(^{15}\) and provides Mirza’s version of his political career and history.

However, his presidency was short-lived. On October 7, 1958, Mirza imposed martial law and dismissed the government. This move was met with widespread opposition, and Mirza was ultimately forced to resign by General Ayub Khan who assumed full control in the military coup. Within mere 20 days, the tables were turned on Mirza. Three of Ayub’s generals went to
President House and took his ‘resignation at gunpoint’ (pp.177); he was ‘banished without warning’.16

Several factors contributed to Iskander Mirza’s political downfall as per the memoirs and other historical accounts. One factor was his decision to impose martial law in 1958. This move was seen as an authoritarian overreach, alienating both the public and the political elite.

Another factor was Mirza’s failure to build a strong political base. He was a political outsider who lacked the support of any major political party. This made it difficult for him to govern effectively and to withstand the challenges he faced during his political career and afterwards. Furthermore, Mirza’s personality traits also played a role in his downfall. He was known to be arrogant and impulsive, making him difficult to work with and alienating many of his potential allies.

To conclude, this book is an indispensable addition to the historical record, offering a nuanced and candid perspective on a pivotal period in Pakistan’s history. The memoir provides invaluable insights into the challenges and decisions that shaped the nation’s early years. This book offers a rich historical context that allows for a more nuanced understanding of Pakistan’s early history and its place in the broader geopolitical landscape.

It is imperative to approach the contents of this book with a consideration of the historical judgments surrounding Mirza. The consensus among Pakistani historians is that Iskander Mirza played a duplicitous role in the manipulation of political affairs, evident in his frequent dismissals of four prime ministers within just four years. As the Head of State, Mirza consistently engaged in power politics and assumed the role of a kingmaker. He was also instrumental in ushering in the first Martial Law in Pakistan’s history. This underscores Mirza’s aversion to democratic governance and his pivotal role in undermining it within Pakistan.

While Iskander Mirza undeniably played a central but damaging role in Pakistan’s political landscape to a great extent, assigning sole culpability to him, while exonerating his co-conspirators, would be both biased and untenable. Mirza was indeed a primary instigator, but he enlisted the assistance of numerous turncoats in the process.
Notes

1. Syed Khawar Mehdi is the founder of think tank Commonwealth Karachi.
2. Born into a wealthy and influential family in Murshidabad, India in 1899, Mirza's lineage traces back to the forefathers who were invited from Najaf by the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb to govern Bengal. These forefathers belonged to the Syed Iraqi Arab lineage and were bestowed with the title of Nawab Nazim of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa, a position held by generations of Mirza's ancestors. Furthermore, Mirza's family directly descended from Mir Jaffar, a historical figure who colluded with the East India Company in the Battle of Plassey (1757).
12. An intriguing, albeit controversial, strategy involved adding stomach-upsetting medicine to the morning tea, leading to an embarrassing incident in 1940 and the eventual closure of the Red Shirts camp in Peshawar.
13. According to Mirza, Jinnah made this claim while talking to him. Therefore, Mirza is the only witness of this.
14. Wali Khan, Facts Are Facts: The Untold Story of India's Partition (Ahmedabad: Vikas Publishing House, 1987). The same quote has been cited by Wali Khan in his book. However, Khan also uses the manuscript of Mirza’s book as a reference for this quote. So, there is no other means to verify the authenticity of this quote. Ahmad Salim, Iskandar Mirza: Rise and Fall of a President (Lahore: Gora Publishers, 1997), https://sanipanhwar.com/Iskandar%20Mirza%20-%20Rise%20and%20Fall%20of%20a%20President.pdf.