

The mother of democracy

Bashir Riaz October 23, 2020

Begum Nusrat Bhutto, the mother of democracy, gave this powerful message to the Martial Law Administrator General Ziaul Haq, “Our heads might roll but they will never bow down. We will fight for the rights of our people, generation after generation.”

These words were welcomed by the people of Pakistan who felt trapped by the continuous oppression of a dictator. The space to breathe was becoming constricted as years of undemocratic rule stretched on but Nusrat Bhutto ensured that she reminded people they can create their own space of freedom by protesting and she will stand by them. Having Nusrat Bhutto leading from the front, party workers fought with great courage and despite harsh measures such as flogging, hanging or exile, they were not deterred in their mission to strive for democracy and restore the will of the people. Their mission united them. In the struggle for Pakistan, they were only Pakistanis and not Punjabis, Pathans, Sindhis or Balochis.

After the judicial murder of Shaheed Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, Begum Nusrat Bhutto redoubled her resolve to continue the political struggle for democracy. On September 16, 1979, General Zia ul Haq postponed the general elections. Pakistan People Party’s voice, Masawat newspaper was shut down and strict censorship was imposed on all modes of communication. A lot of party workers suffered during this time. Begum Nusrat Bhutto and Shaheed Benazir Bhutto were arrested and thrown in jail. These tactics failed to stifle the voice of the people as the streets of Pakistan continued to echo with slogans of “Long Live Bhutto!” The courage of the party leaders inspired courage in the workers and they refused to give up. There were always more people willing to stand up for democracy than the people whose voices were snatched from them in the jails.

In the heartrending and iconic image from Gaddafi Stadium, the world witnessed the barbarity of the martial law where Begum Nusrat Bhutto was captured with a blood-covered face and police holding batons in the background. When dictators are afraid of ideas and freedom of choice, they revert to inhumane tactics and violence. Begum Bhutto was well aware of the risks and threats to her well-being however, she chose to side with the struggle for a democratic Pakistan. Her strong will troubled the autocratic rulers.

On November 22, 1982 Begum Nusrat Bhutto reached Munich, Germany to seek medical care for her illness. Her sister Behjat Hariri accompanied her on this journey. Begum Bhutto was physically weakened but her will was unbreakable. Despite her ill health, she addressed the party workers in Europe. She reminded them of their role as responsible Pakistanis and the difference they could make for their home-country by protesting against dictatorship and working for democracy and rule of law. She reminded them that the seemingly strong pillars of dictatorship were hollow from within and together, with the help of Pakistanis from around the globe, the pillar of oppression could be demolished sooner.

After Shaheed Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto passed away, Begum Bhutto played an integral role in keeping the people united and in high-spirits—focused on the mission of fighting dictatorship. Born on March 23, 1928, our courageous Mother of Democracy passed away on October 23, 2011. She was awarded the title of Mother of Democracy posthumously and the most prestigious award, Nishan e Pakistan.

Her generosity of spirit is evident by her love for Pakistan and Pakistanis. She dedicated her own life as well as the lives of her children and grand-children for the sake of democracy in Pakistan. In an interview with me, she emphasised that the new generation must not forget that “first and foremost, we are Pakistanis. The divisive politics based on being Muhajirs, Sindhis or Balochis is wrong. Our primary affiliation should be with our country. If anyone asks from within or outside the country, where you are from? You must always say I am a Pakistani.”

In 1975, Begum Bhutto represented Pakistan as the First Lady at the International Women’s Conference. In that conference, she was selected as the Vice-President, which was a great honour for Pakistan. Her work, nationally and internationally, will always be remembered as a valuable contribution for the people of Pakistan. As we commemorate her death anniversary, we must remember the lessons of unity, equality and democratic values left behind by her as the legacy of the Bhuttos and guiding light for a prosperous Pakistan.

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