**Leading From The Front**

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“You cannot defend the soil unless you know the smell of that soil.” – Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto

Foreign Minister of Pakistan Bilawal Bhutto Zardari will complete his first 100 days in office, on August 4. Keeping up with the legacy of his grandfather and Former Prime Minister of Pakistan Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto who served as a foreign minister before assuming charge as the chief executive of the country, Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari has carved his own niche and is setting new benchmarks with every passing day.

Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari took the oath as Pakistan’s 37th Foreign Minister in April 2022. In the face of humongous challenges left by the previous government and its mishandling of Pakistan’s foreign relations, Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari has a daunting task ahead of him, to meet the expectations of millions of people.

Despite being the youngest foreign minister in the history of the country, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari has been on a relentless mission to improve Pakistan’s image in the world, and renew its diplomatic ties, especially with the West by engaging them. Since assuming office, he has advocated the case for trade and engagement with other countries. His presence and speeches at the various international forums have exhibited his passion and commitment toward the people of Pakistan, as well as showcased effective communication with clarity of thought in his words and media engagements. The maturity and resolve he displayed while representing the case of Pakistan was a much-needed breath of fresh air.

In a short span of time, Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari has become a celebrity of sorts among the diplomatic community. His gentle mannerism, charisma and humility have earned him global popularity and positive international media coverage which is rare for a Pakistani government official. By leading from the front, Foreign Minister Bilawal has been successful in bridging the diplomatic gap with Pakistan’s allies and striking a balance in its diplomatic relations. He has played a pivotal role in reaffirming Pakistan’s ties with the Gulf Cooperation Council, European Union, US, and other friendly countries which was the need of the hour. His successful visits to important countries like the US, China, KSA, Turkey, UAE and Iran, to name a few, and high-level engagements have helped revive Pakistan’s goodwill in the diplomatic community.

Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari has proven with his actions rather than words that he is a representative of the people of Pakistan and not just Pakistan’s largest political party.

During his maiden visit to the US at the invitation of the Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari had important engagements and sideline meetings. He also met with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and raised the issue of Jammu and Kashmir. He also held an important bilateral meeting with the US Secretary of State Blinken to reset the diplomatic ties between Pakistan and the US and expressed his determination to further strengthen the broad-based and multifaceted bilateral relations.

Another core issue which has been successfully handled by Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari has been raising his concerns regarding the issue of Islamophobia and persecution of Muslims in India. In June, Foreign Minister Bilawal, in a telephone call, apprised the President of the UN General Assembly (PGA), H.E. Abdulla Shahid, of the derogatory and offensive remarks made by two senior officials of India’s ruling party BJP, against the Holy Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him).

He also contacted the OIC Secretary General Hissein Brahim Taha and apprised him of the plight of Muslims in India, and stated that this matter needed to be addressed through collective efforts. As a result of Bilawal Bhutto Zardari’s effective and credible leadership in his first 100 days as the Foreign Minister, Pakistan has managed to get out of the Financial Action Task Force’s grey list, revived the International Monetary Fund’s program which was put on hold, thwarted India’s bid for the United Nations Security Council membership, assisted getting a $2.3 billion loan facility agreement amid dwindling cash reserves, raised the issue of Islamophobia at various international platforms, to name a few.

On his personal special request during his meeting with State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi in China on May 22, 2022, the first batch of Pakistani students was able to return to China for on-campus studies on June 20, 2022. In addition, Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari has led the Pakistani delegation and represented the country at various international forums including the World Economic Forum, and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), among many others. Like a true statesman, he displayed maturity in his interactions and held important bilateral meetings.

A key initiative taken by Foreign Minister Bilawal was the successful convening of the first meeting of the Group of Friends on Countering Disinformation, as a follow-up to the implementation of UN’s landmark resolution 76/227. Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari urged the international countries to create an “international plan of action” to battle disinformation and demanded the United Nations create an effective strategy. This step will have a positive impact globally as the world governments are struggling to control the menace of disinformation campaigns, especially those run on social media.

The Pakistan-sponsored resolution on Countering Disinformation for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms was adopted by the UN General Assembly on Countering Disinformation for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, in June 2022.

Foreign Minister Bilawal has the advantage of representing the new generation of Pakistan. According to the United Nations Development Programme, 64 per cent of Pakistan’s population is under 30 years of age, and 29 per cent of Pakistanis are between 15 and 29. He truly is the representative of the vibrant and emerging youth with a hand on the pulse of the people. His motivation and drive to present the soft image of Pakistan on the global stage are being acknowledged and applauded.

It is said that the darkest hour brings out the best in people. The importance of visionary leadership is often underestimated, nor is the concept too often understood properly. There is a unique set of characteristics which sets statesmen apart: principles, vision, a moral compass, and an innate ability to unite differing factions, and Foreign Minister Bilawal encompasses all of the above qualities.

Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari has proven with his actions rather than words that he is a representative of the people of Pakistan and not just the Chairman of Pakistan’s largest political party. Bilawal Bhutto is a torchbearer of the Bhutto Legacy. He is determined to follow the footsteps of his grandfather Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and mother Shaheed Mohatrma Benazir Bhutto to carry forward their arduous struggle for democracy, fundamental rights and constitutional supremacy.

Great leaders are said to inspire greatness in others, by envisioning and creating policy directions that will bear fruits for generations. In his first 100 days in office, Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari has brilliantly demonstrated his leadership skills, calibre and foresight. He has truly emerged as an icon of hope who will shape the future landscape of the country and will lead Pakistan towards the path of peace, prosperity and progress.

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