**[Benazir & the bomb](https://www.dawn.com/news/1621944/benazir-the-bomb)**

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OF all Pakistan’s accomplishments the most astonishing has been the construction of a nuclear bomb. Far richer countries have tried and failed to go nuclear. It could be argued that South Korea — which faces a nuclear-armed neighbour that challenges its right to exist — has achieved a greater degree of security and well-being by concentrating on economic growth. But such arguments are now academic: Pakistan has the bomb and it’s not going to give it up.

When Zulfikar Ali Bhutto first came up with the idea of a nuclear-armed Pakistan, he had two objectives in mind: parity with India and Pakistan’s emergence as the world’s pre-eminent Muslim power. What he may not have foreseen is just how powerful a factor the programme would become in the country’s internal political development.

Zulfikar’s daughter Benazir always wanted to build on her father’s achievements, and she often said that the bomb was a key part of his legacy. And yet some elements of the Pakistani state never really believed she was committed to the country’s nuclear programme, thinking that before she became prime minister for the first time, she had promised the Americans she would roll it back.

It is perhaps not surprising that some religious hard-liners didn’t trust her with Pakistan’s most powerful asset. Samiul Haq, whose madressah hosted Benazir’s assassins as they plotted to kill her in 2007, said: “Pakistan’s nuclear weapons capability simply cannot be safe under the leadership of a Westernised woman”, and that “she cares more about American approval than ensuring the ummah’s first nuclear bomb”.

Some elements didn’t think Benazir was committed to the nuclear programme.

Such views were not restricted to religious extremists. Within weeks of Benazir becoming prime minister for the first time she was told by the army chief Gen Aslam Baig that the nuclear programme was a ‘no go’ area. She later recalled, “I asked the army chief and he said, ‘It’s got nothing to do with me. It’s the president’”. But Ishaq Khan rebuffed her too: “There is no need for you to know,” he said.

The same went for Pakistan’s proliferation activities. In 1989, Iran’s president Rafsanjani told Benazir that the two countries had reached an agreement on nuclear technology and he wanted to reaffirm it. When she asked the president and army chief what Rafsanjani had been talking about, they reportedly pretended not to know anything about it.

Some Western sources are shedding light on these matters. Benazir’s old friend Peter Galbraith has said the Americans thought Benazir was “persuadable” or even “amenable” on nuclear issues. And a British national archive record of a 1989 meeting with British prime minister Margaret Thatcher gives a hint he was right: Thatcher stressed “the importance of limiting Pakistan’s nuclear programme to peaceful uses” and said that “she knew that Miss Bhutto had given certain assurances to the Americans [and that] it was very important that these should be honoured or US aid would be cut off”. And then the concerns of Pakistan’s deep state apparatchiks were hardly assuaged by the decision of the CIA in 1989 to give Benazir details of her own nuclear programme. The briefing in Washington was far more detailed than any that had been provided by her own officials.

It is difficult to assess how big a role the nuclear issue was in the dismissal of her first government: it was, after all, just one of many factors. But her conduct in her second term suggests that she thought the issue had importance to her political survival. Once back in power, she fully backed Pakistan’s nuclear programme and there are even suggestions that she secretly smuggled discs with information about nuclear technology into North Korea.

The issue came up again when she was lobbying Washington be­­f­ore going for a third term in 2007. And the question again arises: whilst trying to win US backing for that bid for power, did she give Washington any commitments on the nuclear question?

A few days before her return to Pakistan, she was asked in a public seminar what attitude she would take towards the proliferation claims surrounding Pakistan’s leading nuclear scientist A.Q. Khan. Her answer was sufficiently carefully phrased to suggest she had thought about the issue in some detail. She said: “While we do not agree at this stage to have any Western access to A.Q. Khan, we do believe the IAEA … would have the right to put questions to A.Q. Khan.” It was a remark that caused alarm bells to ring back in Islamabad — and, more particularly, Rawalpindi.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s decision to go for the bomb reflected both his huge self-confidence and his capacity to think in broad geostrategic terms. But for all his undoubted political savvy, he may not have appreciated the impact the programme would have on the political fortunes of his daughter.

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