

What Bhutto can still teach us

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Part Nation
Devel

HISTORY as it is taught in the schoolrooms of Pakistan is very different from our collective, and often contested, memories. To an entire generation born after April 4, 1979, the name Shaheed Zulfikar Ali Bhutto is in many ways an abstraction.

Yet his tale, no matter how brief, bears telling. Many tributes will be paid to him all over the world, and hundreds of thousands will grieve at his tomb in Garhi Khuda Bux, where he lies next to his equally iconic daughter.

The fact of the matter is that he was so much more than the grainy footage we will see of him all day today on sombre television channels.

On April 4, the day of his traumatic extra-judicial murder at the hands of a rapacious Ziaul Haq, like most people, even his detractors, the whole nation wept. I was only 18, but I remember our final year class at the Karachi Grammar School being allowed to quietly go home. We could not read history that day. We all knew it had been brutalised forever. Now, more than ever before, this nation needs to hold its icons in high esteem, because we have so few to model our lives on. Shaheed Benazir Bhutto was another such leader. Both father and daughter had one thing in common: they pursued policies that could and did steer their country out of crisis. Both were ahead of their time. Both adapted their party's policies to changing global exigencies while retaining core social values. Shaheed ZAB rode into power on the crest of a wave that people in Pakistan had not seen before in electoral or mainstream politics. He chose to create a vehicle that would reinvent politics in modern Pakistan, and his PPP was the first progressive party with a mass-based philosophy.

Shaheed ZAB did the one thing that no one in Pakistan has ever been able to do: he grafted a social contract for a heterogeneous and regionally disparate nation, through the consensus he built around

ground, but it is still the PPP that evokes strong emotions and an unmatched symbolism of hope in Pakistan's deeply chequered and star-crossed political life.

The challenges that confront Pakistan today have only one match in history: the trauma of a broken Pakistan in 1971.

SZAB steered the country out of its blackest period, when public morale had hit rock bottom and the dream of a stable, prosperous country for the Muslims of South Asia floundered on the rock of missed opportunities and political realities that had spun out of control. The state stood sundered and the nation in shock. At that point, crisis produced a statesman who extracted the state from the paralysis of despair and inaction.

To this day, when we as a nation-state are faced with unprecedented international, economic and domestic pressures, Shaheed Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's party and principles can take us towards the renewal of hope and the institutionalisation of parliamentary democracy. The clear and present danger that Pakistan faces today, that of a rising storm of militancy and terrorism, is not going to go away by pretending that the battle against these trends is someone else's war. It won't go away by an emotional call to arms against regional neighbours or by forces that hold undisputed sway over global military resources.

It may have arisen from a series of interventions in the region, but what we face today is a massive, existential threat. The threat no longer exists in our tribal areas, it no longer holds the border regions hostage, it strikes at the heart of our cities.

Our economy needs time, space and support to survive the global recession, to provide jobs, to mobilise resources to uniformalise education and deliver on social services, but for all of the above, two things are critical. And those were identified by Shaheed Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto as national reconciliation and political stability. Well before she returned to Pakistan on October 18, 2007, to

consensus he built around the famous 1973 Constitution. This is the contract that has been defiled many times over, but survived each attack, each marauder on democracy, as the only document with the moral legitimacy to hold Pakistan together.

This is the foundation that kept the country and the state from falling down like a house of cards, because its memory, even in its defilement, served as a signpost in history, where Pakistan stood up to all pressures, both economic and regional, to start all over again after its very core was shaken by the fall of Dhaka in 1971.

Social and economic justice lay at the heart of Shaheed Z.A. Bhutto's 1973 Constitution. So did protection of the rights of women and minorities, as the lowest of the underprivileged. His vision prioritised the flattening of social pyramids and the empowerment of labour, the privileging of politics as a solution, not as an end in itself. It had outlined a roadmap for provincial autonomy that for its times would have addressed regional grievances in ways to serve the federation better. It saw parliament as the fountain of representative government and public accountability.

The persecution of the PPP that followed its founder's death is now the stuff of political legend. The party that Bhutto Shaheed founded in November 1967 is the only force that still unites the federation. Many times it was pushed under-

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face a sea of humanity that welcomed her, she had pioneered the agenda for national reconciliation. For many years in exile, she worked with us on the Charter of Democracy as the means to rebuilding a new Pakistan. Despite the threats to her person she rushed back to Pakistan the day emergency was imposed by Gen Musharraf.

Her message was very clear: she knew that political forces that stood for a united, stable and progressive Pakistan were the only answer. She had the foresight to see that the very survival of modern Pakistan as her father had reinvented, was at stake. And she, like Shaheed Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, gave her life for a cause. He had tutored her well.

So on April 4, we should give pause, and reflect on what we as citizens can do for this country, not just what Pakistan can do for us. There is hope amongst all the challenges, and a renewal of faith in our ordinary people, who lead the way today. It is time to make history again, or its relentless march will consume us all as accomplices to inaction. ■

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