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**A global leader**

On the eve of December 27, 2007, the sky, the ground and the hearts of the people of Pakistan bled as Pakistan’s beloved former prime minister, Benazir Bhutto, was brutally assassinated. She was a part of our families and our lives – and her loss felt personal to every single Pakistani, regardless of their political affiliations.

Different European countries and American institutions acknowledge Shaheed BB’s contributions towards democracy, rule of law and human rights, and paid tributes to her even after she was gone. I still remember that in June 1984, during a visit to Denmark, two renowned newspapers wrote detailed articles on Shaheed BB and gave her titles akin to ‘Princess of the East’ and ‘Iron Lady’. Such is the nature of a leader who is respected nationally and internationally.

Shaheed BB represented the federation and was the face of unity among the provinces. Not just within Pakistan but also on international forums, she favoured dialogue and believed in conflict resolution through discussions rather than violence. She used to say that we should build bridges and stay positive. There is no doubt that Shaheed BB represented a brighter side and positive image of Pakistan.

She highlighted the Kashmir issue on various international forums. In a conference by the OIC held in Morocco, as prime minister Benazir Bhutto spoke about Kashmir and helped the All Parties Hurriyat Conference become a member organization. Shaheed BB had a clear stance on the Kashmir conflict. She believed that the people of Kashmir should have the right to decide their future.

In line with the UN resolution on the subject, she suggested a “soft border” between Azad Kashmir and Occupied Kashmir to give relief to the Kashmiris. This would have allowed the two sides to mingle, discuss their problems, and eventually, reach a consensus on the Kashmir issue. Similarly, she raised her voice on the issue of Palestine and stopped purchases from stores owned by supporters of the oppressors of the Palestinians.

Shaheed BB loved her country and never stopped propagating a positive image of Pakistan when overseas. During her exile, she continued her struggle for democracy in Pakistan. She would deliver lectures in the UK and the US where she would meet their national leaders and tell them about the struggle for democracy in Pakistan. These meetings were not publicized because she believed that success lies in discretion.

In 2003, she visited Delhi where the then Indian prime minister, Vajpaee, consulted her about visiting Pakistan. When I mentioned this in an article, she advised against commenting on a private discussion as it was against diplomatic protocols. Her meetings played a significant role in building a narrative outside Pakistan that during those precarious circumstances, as Pakistan was fighting terrorism, it was imperative that the people of Pakistan were onboard. The only way to achieve that was through supporting democracy in Pakistan. As part of these efforts, Shaheed Benazir Bhutto had to return to Pakistan, a country where her party had support across the nation.

In 2005, the American assistant secretary of state was visiting Dubai for a conference and expressed her wish to meet Shaheed BB. Shaheed BB invited her to dinner and an interesting conversation transpired. She practically told her that Musharraf is going to be the president for the next ten years and you will have reached the age of sixty by then. Therefore, you should consider leaving politics and become the chairperson of the human rights commission.

BB responded, “I have not struggled for so many years only to become some representative of the United Nations. I will return to Pakistan, which is my first and last priority. I will stand by my people who suffered in jails and persevered through a lot of challenges. I will never abandon my people”. Upon hearing this categorical response, the subject was changed and not brought up again.

Shaheed BB was well aware of the potential threat to her life at that time. General Musharraf had refused to provide an adequate security detail to Benazir Bhutto and was adamant that she should not return to Pakistan. Such measures, or lack thereof, did not deter Shaheed BB from returning to her homeland. She knew the PPP had to fight and win elections in Pakistan to be able to bring a real democratic change in the country.

In 2002, the election results were such that the government could not be formed by a single party and it had to be a coalition with the PPP-P and in those circumstances, some representatives elected on the PPPP’s tickets joined Musharraf, which was a great setback for the party. In 2008, Shaheed BB realized that her presence in the country was vital to avoid a repeat of 2002. In this way, she chose to protect her party’s ideology and vision and returned to Pakistan where forces, threatened by her democratic ideals, extinguished her life. But just like they were unable to extinguish the love of Shaheed Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto from the hearts of the people, they only cemented love for her in her death.

All expectations are now linked with the torchbearers of her legacy which is currently being carried forward by Bilawal Bhutto Zardari. The Bhutto family has never chosen a path that was simply easy or which was in their personal interest. This is a unique family in Pakistan that has made immense personal sacrifices for the sake of their country. As a result, they continue to rule the hearts of the common people.

The writer is the former press secretary of Shaheed Benazir Bhutto, and adviser to Bilawal Bhutto, chairman PPP-P.