**SMBB: Tethered to the people forever**

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Fourteen years on, as we marked Shaheed Benazir Bhutto’s birthday, she is not amongst us physically but her name is still alive in the hearts and minds of the people across the world. June 21, 2022 was Shaheed BB’s 69th birthday. Death is an undeniable reality but some people are born to live beyond death. In Pakistan, the Bhutto family has forever left a permanent mark on the political landscape of our country. Benazir Bhutto, just like her father Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, remains alive for all those who believe in democracy. For women in Pakistan, Benazir Bhutto is a great inspiration—an example that women in our country can achieve great things. She is a pioneer of women leadership in the Muslim World. Known as the Daughter of the East, Benazir Bhutto is the star that did not shatter under the autocratic rule of the dictator and its brilliance did not dim in the collective consciousness of the people of Pakistan and the World. A recent example is the rich tribute paid by Jacinda Ardern, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, for Shaheed BB at an event in Harvard University. She said, “There will be opinions and differing perspectives written about all of us as political leaders. Two things that history will not contest about Benazir Bhutto. She was the first Muslim female Prime Minister elected in an Islamic country, when a woman in power was a rare thing. She was also the first to give birth in office. The second and only other leader to have given birth in office almost 30 years later, was me.” Arden also quoted Benazir Bhutto’s remarks on democracy from BB’s speech in 1989: ‘We must realise that democracy can be fragile’, and went on to say, “Now I read those words as I sat in my office in Wellington, New Zealand, a world away from Pakistan. And while the reasons that gave rise to her words then were vastly different, they still ring true.”
Benazir Bhutto stood for a progressive and democratic Pakistan, fighting for a Pakistan where the weak and the strong have equal voice. Her struggle for democracy ended up taking her life but fear never dissuaded her. Perhaps she inherited this trait from her father who refused to bow down to a military dictator and chose to go down in history as someone who would never give up on his democratic principles for self-preservation. Years later, when his daughter was warned by Pervez Musharraf not to return to Pakistan and stay away from elections, she refused and chose to return and be part of the democratic electoral process. As she finished an election rally in Rawalpindi on December 27, 2007, she was assassinated by a suicide bomber who shot her and blew himself up. She died amongst her people. Shaheed BB served two terms as prime minister of Pakistan and both times, her government was interrupted and her term ended prematurely. In a sharp contrast to today’s politicians, Benazir Bhutto continued her fight within the arena of democracy. Her brand of politics promoted reconciliation and forgiveness for political opponents. She always maintained grace in her attitude and a sense of decorum in her speeches. There was no hideous name-calling involved or personal attacks from her on others. She represented the positive side of Pakistan which improved Pakistan’s relations abroad and encouraged foreign investments.
People supported Shaheed BB for her empathy not only for her own people but also for Muslims around the world. On several occasions on the international fora, Shaheed BB raised her voice for the people of Kashmir and Palestine. The slogan of her party remained “roti, kapra, makaan” and she implemented many social programmes for the welfare of the underprivileged during her life. Even after her death, her successors carried forward her vision. One example is her vision to empower women economically that materialised in 2008 in the form of Benazir Income Support Program. Through this programme, cash is transferred directly to female members of households. Handing over economic decision-making power to women in a patriarchal society is nothing short of a huge feat. Those who tried to silence Shaheed BB’s voice failed in their mission because her legacy remains alive today through her work and her ideals that are being carried forward by her party. Today, her son Bilawal Bhutto Zardari is the Minister of Foreign Affairs, following in the footsteps of his grandfather and his mother. Looking down from heaven, Shaheed BB must be very proud of her son. As our country is going through a challenging time politically and economically, I cannot help but think that if Shaheed BB were still amongst us, she would have pulled us away from all these crises because of her vision and her political acumen. We cannot wish away the infortunes that befell us in the past. It gives me great comfort and hope that Bilawal Bhutto is now carrying the torch for Pakistan’s only major party of the left that was founded to represent egalitarianism and social justice.
Some connections cannot be severed even after death. Through her ideals, her work for the people and her vision for a democratic Pakistan, we are forever tethered to Shaheed Benazir Bhutto.