**The Rise and Eclipse of Benazir Bhutto**

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It was on 27 December 2007 that we lost the national leader and iconic daughter of Sindh, Benazir Bhutto. This sad day brings back the historic events of her relentless battle to save the life of her illustrious father, to keep the PPP intact and to have democracy restored in the country in the face of dictator Zia’s determined course of turning Pakistan into an illiberal, regressive garrison state and an intolerant theocracy. The path leading to these noble objectives was strewn with thorny difficulties and required an equal amount of gallantry, determination and will. Benazir Bhutto, notwithstanding her young age and political inexperience, displayed every bit of these qualities as the political heiress of Z.A. Bhutto.

Benazir Bhutto effectively stewarded the PPP from April 1979 to December 2007. She ushered it into power three times – December 1988, November 1993, and February 2008 by the wave of public sympathy created by her tragic martyrdom. Some people say her spouse Asif Ali Zardari proved her Achilles’ heel; forcing her to change her political ideals and become complicit in his money-making adventures. The leading subscribers to this prognosis are Khalid Hassan and Syedah Abida. Some of her detractors say she believed in power politics and made glaring compromises to gain power. No doubt, gaining power is the ultimate goal of all political parties and politicians enabling themselves for public service. However, no politician of any worth would like to slaughter his or her political ideals or compromise on the salient points of the party’s manifesto. Doing politics in the peculiar political realities of Pakistan, Late Benazir Bhutto made every effort to maintain a sort of balance between her political objectives and the well-entrenched political realities staring her in the face that included the hostility towards Bhuttos by the omnipotent establishment and its stooges unleashed in the political field.

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We regretfully noted her first glaring compromise with the establishment in December 1988. Her party had emerged as the single largest group in the National Assembly. She was in a position to form the central government seeking a coalition with any small party. The Acting President procrastinated to invite her to form the government. In the meanwhile, he explored all the possibilities of propelling IJI into power or extricating maximum concessions from Benazir to the advantage of the establishment. His strategy worked well and Benazir agreed to have him elected as President; appoint General Yaqub Ali Khan as Foreign Minister; not interfere in foreign and security policies on India, Afghanistan, or USA; keep away from the country’s nuclear policy, promotions and postings of senior army officers. Some PPP leaders resisted this compromise preferring to occupy opposition benches. She overruled everyone in the party and even her sibling Mir Murtaza Bhutto who, in later years, had even blamed her to have made a deal with dictator Zia to end her exile in April 1986. What happened during the subsequent 18 months she was in power is part of our long history of bad governance, political squabbling and corruption. She was dismissed in August 1990.

Her complicity with the President to dismiss the government of Mian Nawaz Sharif who had replaced her at the behest of the establishment, was evident when she allowed her spouse and a few other PPP sympathizers to join the interim government of Balakh Baz Mazari formed in 1993.

She won the election of 1993 and formed her second government which was marred by long quarrels with Chief Justice Sajjad Ali Shah, President Farooq Leghari and Asif Ali Zardari and above all her spouse’s rancorous hostility to Mir Murtaza Bhutto which finally led to the tragic murder of the latter by the police near 70 Clifton in Karachi and dismissal of her government on 6 November 1996 by the president. This added to her miseries compelling her to go into a long spell of self-imposed exile.

She signed the Charter of Democracy with her political archrival Mian Nawaz in London who was overthrown by General Pervaiz Musharraf and exiled to Saudi Arabia in a deal brokered by the Lebanese leader Rafiq Hariri and Saudi officials. However, after some years when the corruption cases against her and her spouse in Swiss and British Courts (Cotecna and Surrey Palace) were heading towards adverse verdicts against them, she entered into clandestine negotiations with General Musharraf for a compromise. The latter struck a deal with her under pressure from US President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair who wanted to broaden his political base enabling him to serve their interests in Afghanistan. According to the deal, she had to return to Pakistan after the general elections to be held in February 2008. In the meanwhile, the Musharraf regime would approach the Swiss and British authorities to close the ongoing cases against her and her spouse. The Attorney General addressed letters to these courts withdrawing the cases against them.

Once the cases against them were closed, she took a bold decision to end her exile and return to Pakistan on 18 October 2007 despite security threats to her life. Her jubilant return was marred by a bloody suicidal attack on her caravan killing 150 workers of the party and her security guards.

Undaunted by this mayhem, she plunged into forceful electioneering addressing huge public meetings from city to city. Public devotion to her was unprecedented and her skill of bonding with the adulatory crowds was at its peak. She was a couple of months away from her third term as the Prime Minister of this enigmatic country. But the evil stars in the sky had something tragic in store for this iron lady. The enemies of Bhuttos and liberal, progressive and democratic Pakistan struck on 27 December 2007 to the chagrin of the millions of her admirers.

Notwithstanding her political lapses and the compromises she made in her political career, she stood taller than her peers in political skills, and diplomatic and intellectual calibre, and had gained world fame as a political fighter, resilient leader and eloquent speaker. She was an asset to Pakistan and a protective wall for Sindh. Being equally popular in all the provinces, she was the gelling strength of the federation of Pakistan.

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