

Pakistan: Civil society meets Benazir Bhutto: day 14 of underground life

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I got a call at 7pm on 16 November from Asma Jehanghir's office, "you must come tonight at 9pm to her place for an important meeting".

The chairperson of the most prestigious social institution, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), Asma Jehanghir was just released a day earlier from her house detention. I had many second thoughts about going there. "The police must be there and so on". But, then decided to go in any case. I knew that it is something very important; that is why only two hours earlier I had been contacted.

While at Asma's residence, a constable stopped me and asked why you have come. If I would have come in a car, he might not ask that question. But I was on a motorbike with my helmet on. I told him to open the gate and I am invited by Asma to come here. He reluctantly opened the gate.

Inside, there were all the signs of an important meeting. Private guard, HRCP staff and others were there to check who had come. I was immediately told by Nadeem Anthony, Asma's public relations officer, that Benazir Bhutto is coming to meet the civil society activists.

Inside the meeting room, there were several close friends. Dr Mehdi Hasan, a radical professor at a private university...; Rabia Bajwa, the women advocate who has made headlines with her commitment to the advocate movement; my colleague and teacher in journalism from the seventies, Hussain Naqi; Fareda Shaheed, Gulnar and Mumtaz Khawar of Shirkat Ghah, a radical women's NGO; Neelum Hussain from Seemorg, another women's NGO; journalist Abbas Rashid; Imtiaz Alam of South Asia Free Medi Association (SAFMA); Samina Rehman and Rashid Rehman, aunt and father of Timur Reham of Communist Mazdoor Kissan Party (CMKP); Afrasayb Khatak of Awami National Party; leaders of Punjab Union of Journalists; and several more were there.

Before Benazir Bhutto arrived, we were seated according to Asma's choice and I was among those sitting in the front row of 12.

Asma distributed a letter that was to be handed over to Benazir Bhutto titled "road map for democratic transition". There was some discussion on the letter and the following 9 point agenda was approved:

1. A democratic transition and a free and fair election are not possible under a government headed by General Musharaf in any capacity. He must resign from all offices forthwith along with the caretaker administration put in place by him.
2. The country must return to constitutional rule, for which the immediate lifting of the state of emergency and restoration of fundamental rights is a prerequisite.
3. The judiciary must be restored.
4. All curbs on media must end.
5. All detainees including judges, lawyers, political activists, students and human rights

defenders must be released and charges dropped.

6. Amendments made to the 1952 Army Act by Musharaf must be immediately withdrawn.
7. An independent and credible Election Commission must be constituted.
8. The spread of violence by non state actors across the country has to be effectively countered through all possible means within the ambit of the law.
9. An independent commission must be formed to investigate widespread incidents of disappearances, torture and arbitrary detentions during the Musharaf period.

There was some analysis of the present situation as well in the letter. We had some more suggestions on the conditions of the working class and policies of the present regime, but it was explained that we are only focusing on the present situation and do not want to present a long letter. The letter was unanimously accepted as a letter from the civil society organizations and individuals.

Benazir Bhutto arrived and the media wanted a talk earlier than the meeting proceedings could start. She spoke to them briefly. I was meeting her for the first time since 1998 when a similar but a brief group of civil society organizations met her in Islamabad before she went into exile on the question of the Shariat Bill that Nawaz Sharif's government wanted to introduce in the parliament. We asked her to lend her support against this bill. It was a good meeting and we had a brief chat between the two of us as she recognized me from my days of exile.

Benazir Bhutto was now an ageing politician with some white hairs and looked tired. The meeting started with Asma explaining the reasons for this meeting. Benazir Bhutto said she has come here to listen rather than to speak and wanted to know the opinion of the civil society. During the brief speech, she emphasized the formation of a new political alliance against the military regime. She also spoke [about the] aspects of the 1973 constitution that have to be reviewed.

Benazir Bhutto told us about her contacts with different political parties' heads and her difficulties in forming an immediate alliance. "I had two hours talk with Nawaz Sharif, the former prime minister, yesterday and agreed on many points" she said. She also spoke of her commitment to democracy and Pakistan. She referred to her talks with Musharaf and told us that it was for a smooth transition to democracy, but Musharaf did not abide by his promises and now there is no question of talks with him.

She read the letter and said that she will come up with a detailed reply to this but she agrees with most of it. She made a categorical statement in favor of the restoration of the judiciary, "they have shown a way forward and we must be with them. We can not leave it to the advocates but we must have a political movement as well," she said.

There was nearly an hour and a half of questions, contributions and her reactions. It was mainly focused on policies and also on the building of the united movement.

I welcomed her detour and told her that it is very welcome detour. We were all unhappy and critical about your talks with the military regime. But that is over now and we are happy. She smiled on my "detour" word.

I told her about the sheer corruption under the present military government, plight of the working class and peasantry, the price hike, the land mafia, the Okara struggle of the peasants, the arrests and fight back and the need for a broader alliance to fight the regime. I said we do not trust at all the Americans and we have to build a movement to overthrow this government. I told her some figures of the price hike and said the issues of poverty, unemployment and labor conditions have not become your priorities. You have only reached the middle class but the working class has to come into the field. They are not in the movement because there is not much in your program for them.

She heard me patiently and said yes, I agree with you on the points and it is a question of bread and butter that has to be the main issue. There were several others who referred to these points and it was a live discussion.

I left at the last moment of Benazir Bhutto summing up, to meet Naheed Khan, her secretary and a former member of parliament, who was outside the meeting hall to take some telephone calls. We had a brief chat and she was happy to see me again. We had some time together in exile during the early eighties. She invited us for the meeting of political parties on 21 November in Karachi. I told her that more than 200 activists from AJT, the Left alliance, have been arrested and [there are] still more to go jail....

The road outside was blocked by all the police vans that were there for security of Benazir Bhutto.

At the meeting, it seemed that most of the participants are reading my underground life stories. Every one I spoke to asked me not to be arrested and to organize the fight. A lot of references were made towards my great escapes.

Earlier on in the day, I went to attend a meeting of Lahore Social Forum but I was late for the meeting and the meeting was over. They were surprised to see me there. I met some of them and discussed the present situation.

Several political activists and advocates have been released on bail yesterday but the campaign goes on. More arrests are made and some arrested are being released on bail. The most pleasant surprise came from the University of Punjab, where, for the second day running, thousands of students are demonstrating against the behaviors of Islami Jamiat Tulaba (Islamic Association of Students) linked to Jamat-I Islami. The IJT leadership kidnapped Imran Khan and then handed him over to the police. There is rebellion at the campus after 30 years of religious fundamentalist occupation. We discussed some measures to intervene into this movement.

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