

War on Terror reaches Karachi as Benazir arrives

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On her homecoming from second exile under the intense glare of the local and global media, Benazir Bhutto dominated the TV screens, initially, the world-over on 18 October's afternoon. As her snail-paced mass procession came out of airport, blood seeped through the headlines. An Iraq-style twin bombing ripped through the lavish security measures, leaving 150 dead, 500 injured while Benazir narrowly escaped the attempt on her life. To everybody's horror, the threats passed by Pakistani-Taliban commanders ahead of her return had come true.

In view of the threats as well as the US support for Benazir, Mushroom government provided an effusive security cover: a bulletproof truck and 20 thousand policemen. Besides, PPP volunteers in their thousands were mobilised to provide security. Yet, bombers slit the security measures and played havoc.

According to an Asia Times online correspondent: 'The hour of the attack --- just before midnight --- was carefully chosen. The crowd of Bhutto supporters had dwindled to not more than 20,000 people, compared to the 100,000-200,000 people who attended a welcoming rally in the afternoon. This allowed the attackers to get close to Bhutto'. She was lucky to have narrowly escaped.

That the target was Benazir is true but not the whole truth. By targeting Benazir Bhutto, Taliban gave a warning to US and her allies.

WARNING TO US

Choreographed by US, Benazir's return was a complex affair.

Fundamentalists saw her return to Pakistan as a US-sponsored act akin to the arrival in Kabul Northern Alliance in 2001. Hence, notorious Taliban commander Baitullah Mehsud had vowed to kill her. Her offence, in Mehsud's view was: 1) her support for military attack on Red Mosque (soon after Red Mosque operation, a suicide attack on Benazir's supporters left 40 dead), 2) her statement that she would allow incursions by US forces into Pakistan in pursuit of bin Laden; 3)- her promise to West that she would allow the IAEA to question Dr Khan, a leading nuclear scientist, accused of passing nuclear technology to Iran.

Another Taliban commander, Haji Omar, told BBC: 'Benazir is coming to Pakistan on US dictation in order to launch operation against holy warriors. Like Musharraf, she will also be a target of our attacks'

US-SPONSORED RETURN

That Benazir's return was a US-sponsored act is beyond doubt. General Musharraf has publicly confessed to US hand in negotiating Benazir's homecoming. It all started when. General Musharraf was plunged into an abyss of unpopularity and weakened beyond repair following a mass movement that took hold of Pakistan in summer this year. His bloody handling of now world-famous Red Mosque further snatched carpet from under his feet. Taliban and pro-Taliban forces in Pakistan

retaliated, in the wake of Red Mosque saga, with suicide attacks on military installation on almost daily basis. For few weeks, Talibans ruled the roost in Pakistan. The military seemed helpless while an extremely unpopular Musharraf was unable to control either 'war on terror' or the country itself. As usual, White House stepped in. Musharraf was dragged to cohabitation with Benazir whom Musharraf had declared a corrupt politician not to be allowed to return as long as he was in power. The US plan was to use Benazir's mass social base to minimise ever-big anti-US sentiments in Pakistan while using Musharraf's military might to curb Taliban who have completely taken over the Tribal Areas and certain districts bordering Afghanistan (where 'Sharia' laws have turned the region to Taliban-era Kabul: girls education banned and men ordered to grow beard plus public hangings for US spies, adulterers etc).

Even as Benazir arrived, a British Minister, Lord Malloch-Brown, arrived in Pakistan to discuss a future pro-Western government in Islamabad. The day before, the British Deputy High Commissioner in Karachi, Hamish Daniel, called on Sindh Governor Ishratul Ebad to ensure that Bhutto's homecoming was accorded full protocol.

Ironically, it was the same Benazir Bhutto barred from EU institutions owing to corruption cases against her. But then what's new in it. Western governments have long pampered shady characters in their attempts to organise the globe to their liking.

Washington and its allies hope to have a pro-Western government, with Musharraf as president and Benazir as prime minister, after parliamentary elections in January next year. The plan was put in action early October with the promulgation of a National Reconciliation Ordinance. Under the ordinance, all charges against current and former lawmakers who have been accused of corruption (Benazir most prominent among them) were dropped. In return, Benazir helped Musharraf to get re-elected as president. In Pakistan, president is elected by national and provincial parliaments.

UNPOPULAR DEAL BUT BIG RECEPTION

Though the Benazir-Musharraf deal was universally unpopular in Pakistan (according to polls, she lost popularity in October compared to May this year), yet she was received by an unprecedentedly big crowd in Karachi. There are many explanations for this big crowd. It generated a lot of media frenzy both locally and globally.

'Hero's welcome', screamed CNN. 'Benazir togs emot som en drottning', (Benazir gets a queen's welcome) commented Swedish tv (SvT). An otherwise Benazir-hostile electronic media in Pakistan, baffled by the mass reception she received at Karachi airport, went into rapture over the scale of mass mobilisation. Comparisons were made with million-man reception she got in Lahore on her return from exile in 1986. 'One million received me in 1986. Two million today', claimed Benazir herself on a Pakistani tv channel as she left the Karachi airport.

Reuters, however, thought quarter of a million turned up while AP put the number at hundred thousand.

Her second homecoming, however, was no comparison to 1986. On her arrival in Lahore back then, she recited and immortalised a poem published in *Jeddojuhd* (now a weekly), a small left monthly: 'Main Baghi hoon, Main baghi hoon (I am the rebel. I am the rebel)'. In response, million-man crowd was chanting: 'Benazir aai hej, Inqilab lai hej'. (Benazir has returned with revolution). Her return then had electrified Pakistan in 1986. Optimism reigned supreme unless she came to power and disillusioned toiling millions with her pro-US, neo-liberal and anti working class policies coupled with corruption. Her husband, Asif Ali Zardari, soon became notorious as Mr Ten Percent in Pakistan since he was supposedly taking ten percent as bribes for all the governmental financial contracts. She was removed from power in 1990 under military pressure but returned to power in 1993. Her

second stint in power was even frustrating. Mr Ten Percent now became Mr Centpercent. In 1997 general elections, her PPP met a stunning defeat. Across Pakistan, PPP won 19 parliamentary seats. However, in 2002 general election, PPP emerged as largest party while Benazir was still abroad in exile. The PPP vote bank returned to Benazir since PPP voters refused to vote either for the Islamists or pro-military Muslim League. Formed in 1967, PPP has a history of fighting military dictatorships. Its workers offered heroic sacrifices particularly during 1980s when General Zia was ruling Pakistan with an iron fist. Though Benazir had welcomed the imposition of martial law by Musharraf in 1999, thinking she would return to power, yet she was forced to oppose it later since Musharraf refused to deal with her. During all these years, her popularity remained fluctuating. Her support to US war in Iraq and Afghanistan was widely condemned in Pakistan. Her father and PPP founder, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto remains an icon for his anti-US foreign policy as prime minister of Pakistan 1972-77. A CIA-backed military coup removed him from power and he was hanged in 1979. His death became a martyrdom and he nearly achieved the status of a saint in Pakistan, particularly in his home province of Sindh.

Bhutto's saintly-iconic status also was the one reason that crowd gathered in its hundreds of thousands on October 18. Benazir knew well hence she landed Karachi, capital of Sindh province as well as country's largest city. Support for Benazir in Sindh also reflects the acute national question in Pakistan. Since Punjab, largest province that also constitutes 70 percent of the military, is seen by smaller provinces as a usurper.

Also, secular minded, PPP workers felt isolated as only religious right grew in last five years. These politics-hungry PPP workers reached to receive Benazir Bhutto to end their isolation imposed by a combination of mullah-military collaboration. As usual, money played a role. A big chunk was also bussed in from across Pakistan. 'It was a three-billion-rupees (1 US dollar=60 Rupees) reception', reported country's largest Urdu-daily Jang. Still, on her arrival, PPP workers half-heartedly chanted 'Go Musharraf Go', to express their harmless disapproval of the deal.

PAKISTAN SHOCKED

The attacks on rally have shocked Pakistan. This suicidal attack is seen as a warning note to all the democratic forces and an attack on civil liberties, right of association and assembly. An attempt is to terrify people struggling to get rid of militarism and religious fundamentalism. While Benazir has blamed Islamists (giving a clean chit to Musharraf) in the military intelligence (ISI), fact of the matter is roots of evil suicidal missions lie elsewhere. It is US and NATO forces in Afghanistan and Iraq that are generating frustration and anger. Bombing of Red Mosque July this year and increasing US bombings of the tribal areas of Pakistan where hundreds have lost their lives has resulted in a great anger among the youth. Many of those have opted to go for suicidal attacks to avenge. Suicidal attacks are a miscalculation of the religious fundamentalism who believes that it is the only way to teach the imperialist a lesson. Imperialist forces and their agents in Pakistan will not be silenced by these suicidal attacks, on the contrary more repressive laws and restrictions to their civil liberties will meet ordinary citizens of Pakistan. Rallies have already been banned in Punjab province on the pretext of law and order following Karachi episode. Repression will further weaken the progressive forces and civil society while fundamentalists will feed on the resulting frustration.

Though the unfortunate victim like in Afghanistan and Iraq is an ordinary working class Pakistani even if the target was pro-US Benazir Bhutto.

CHICKENS HAVE COME HOME TO ROOST

The Karachi incidence reflects the phenomenon of blowback. Taliban, both in Pakistan and Afghanistan, were launched, pampered, patronised, financed and armed by Pakistan military.

Ironically, it was during Benazir Bhutto's second term in office that Taliban were imposed on Kabul. She, to this day, defends her policy of dispatching Taliban to Kabul while her then Interior Minister Naseerullah Babur (used to call Taliban as his 'boys') still rationalises that by dispatching Taliban to Kabul, Pakistan out-sourced an internal threat. True, the father of Taliban was Pakistan military. But Benazir played the midwives if not the mother. Not to forget that all this was done with US blessing.

From Red Mosque bloody shootout in July this year to Karachi bombings, the ongoing fight is yet another saga where apprentice turns against sorcerer.

The apprentice, the Taliban, went out of control after 9/11 in a gradual process. as the relationship between the religious fundamentalists in Pakistan and the state forces changed under US pressure. The decades-old close relationship between the two has resulted in growing influence of religious fundamentalism. The religious fundamentalist forces control North West Frontier Province (NWFP), one of the four provinces. They are coalition partner in Balochistan province. The official opposition leader in the outgoing parliament was a mullah from MMA, the alliance of religious forces. The total votes of the religious forces in the fraudulent general elections in 2002 were around 15 per cent. Incident like Red Mosque have definitely helped the religious forces to increase their share of votes and sympathies.

The progressive forces in Pakistan must have an independent position to condemn the both. Progressives can not lend any support to one enemy in opposition to the other one. The Military Junta with the support of American imperialism and the religious fundamentalists are both enemies of the working class. They both are against trade unions and radical social and political organizations. They both are believers of private property and free market. They both have same economic policies which are primarily responsible for the absolute poverty stricken conditions of the masses across glob. We can not sit a side to see the fight between the two bulls. We must oppose the both to build our own ranks by fighting for the rights of the working class.