

South Asia

Pakistan's Yearning for Democracy and Freedom from US Dictates

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[This article was written before emergency was imposed in Pakistan- Ed.]

Benazir Bhutto's return to Pakistan has been marked by the worst ever incident of suicide bombing in the recent history of the subcontinent, killing and injuring hundreds of innocent people. Soon after the incident Benazir said that she had been warned by intelligence agencies of a 'brotherly country' regarding a possible attack on her arrival. Regardless of whatever input might have been provided by intelligence agencies, it is not difficult to understand what possibly triggered such an enormous tragedy.

"Join the war on terror or be bombed back to the Stone Age" was the 'option' given to Pakistan in the wake of 9/11 by none other than Richard Armitage, then US Secretary of State. Pakistan under President Musharraf has dutifully heeded that advice and the bombings have never really stopped. The popular mood on the Pakistani street and the direction chosen by the country's ruling elite are so diametrically opposite that the conflict can indeed explode anytime anywhere. And with no credible democratic process to reflect this public anger, suicide bombings and terrorist attacks find an obviously fertile ground.

The ongoing convulsions in Pakistan emanate from two closely interrelated concerns. With Iraq and Afghanistan bleeding so profusely under US occupation, the average Pakistani's sympathy clearly lies with the people of Iraq and Afghanistan and Musharraf's policy of compliance and active collaboration with the US naturally remains a source of tremendous mass anger. Simultaneously, there is a visible yearning for restoration of democracy, for a real end to military rule and not just a civilian facade. Far from satisfying either of these concerns, a US-brokered 'democratic deal' only adds insult to injury.

How different was the welcome Benazir had got on 10 April, 1986 when she had returned seven years after her father had been hanged by General Zia ul-Haq! On that occasion she had landed in Lahore, which unlike Karachi, is not a Pakistan People's Party (PPP) stronghold and yet she was greeted by a much bigger crowd than could be managed by her party when she reached Karachi on October 18. It was widely believed that her father had been hanged at the behest of the US and so in 1986 Benazir had the sympathy of all sections of the people of Pakistan who wanted to get rid of both military rule and American intervention. It is another matter that far from fulfilling these twin aspirations, Benazir's two stints in power (1988-90 and 1993-96) only earned notoriety for unbridled corruption.

Worse still, now in 2007 she has come back from her self-imposed exile only as another pro-US face. Her pro-democracy pretension has also been badly exposed by the deal she struck with Musharraf. While her member of parliaments (MPs) bailed out Musharraf by abstaining during the controversial

October 6 presidential poll, the latter fully reciprocated by promulgating a National Reconciliation Ordinance just on the eve of the poll withdrawing all corruption charges against Benazir and her key associates. Meanwhile on the question of the collaborating with the US in the so-called 'war on terror' Benazir continues to back Musharraf to the hilt as has been evident during her response to the "Operation Silence" campaign when hundreds of people were killed by the Pakistani Army in the name of freeing Lal Masjid from the control of fanatics and terrorists.

The events happening in Pakistan today are mostly choreographed by the Bush administration. On September 10 Nawaz Sharif was bundled back to Saudi Arabia soon after his plane had landed at Islamabad because he still does not figure in the US scheme of things. But the same Musharraf extended all courtesy and assistance to Benazir thanks to the US-brokered Bhutto-Musharraf power-sharing deal. The US has offered all help to investigate the suicide bombing plot and by all indications US intervention in Pakistan's internal affairs will continue to grow. The threat of Pakistan being reduced to another Afghanistan in the name of combating terrorism will continue to loom large.

Against this backdrop, we in India can only keep our fingers crossed while hoping wholeheartedly for a real anti-imperialist democratic resurgence in Pakistan that alone can bring some meaningful political change in that country and lasting peace in the subcontinent.

P.S.

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