

Pakistan: dynasty vs democracy

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Created 2008-01-09 15:48

"Nobody can go until their time is up", said Benazir Bhutto to an Indian television channel in the traumatic aftermath of the first attempt on her life on 18 October 2007 [1]. It's a truism that is found in other cultures, but as an Islamic dictum it seems to gain conviction on repetition. Since the leader of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) was assassinated in Rawalpindi on 27 December, the Pakistani and regional media have broadcast clips of that pronouncement (and the many variations she uttered around the time) again and again.

If fate decrees death, in Pakistani politics it also sanctions elevation. The almost instant decision to replace [11] the martyred leader with an uneasy partnership between her son (19-year-old student son Bilawal) and widower (the compromised Asif Ali Zardari) at the head of the PPP [12] was clinching evidence - if such were needed - that in Pakistan dynasty trumps democracy every time. The most recent example indicates that the Bhuttos, like the Bourbons, have learned nothing and forgotten nothing from the latest tragedy to befall them. But the fate they carry is not only theirs - it is Pakistan's itself.

South Asia: family business

The people of the Indian sub-continent are consumed by talk of fair elections, but somewhere in their heart - from Sri Lanka to Bangladesh through India and Pakistan - many still hanker for the bygone age of Rajas and Maharajas. True democracy is less than a century old in the region (some say it remains illusory); the legacy of kings and emperors is far deeper - perhaps more than 2,000 years. This experience shaped the mentality of the people and moulded their temperament; religion's shameless enjoining of loyalty to the monarch reinforced the sense of submission to divinely ordained power.

The advantages thus conferred are evident: an aura of infallibility and godliness for royalty, freedom from any responsibility for decision-making for the ruled multitude.

It is little wonder, then, that even the age of democracy in the region is still trapped in endless cycles of dynastic rule. The Sri Lankans were the pioneers, with three generations [13] of the Bandranaike family influential figures in politics in the decades since independence in 1948; the Indians followed with the

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Gandhi-Nehru "royal" family in the 1960s and again in the 1990s (while today, the Rahul/Priyanka generation seeks [14] its turn); Bangladesh [15] has opted for the flawed scion of its imperious founder, plus the widow of the general who succeeded him.

Now, again, it is Pakistan's turn to see a half-decent bloodline in a semi-feudal family business as a better guarantor of political authority than a process of democratic debate among free citizens leading to an open election.

Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari's appointment as the bearer of Benazir's extinguished flame was, in a strict political sense, preordained. Everyone in Pakistan knows that without the "Bhutto" name at its head the Pakistan People's Party cannot exist. This, after all, is not a country of scientifically, rationally organised political parties. Rather, their structure reflects the anarchy of Pakistan's political system, the ambitions of its current leader and the finances at his disposal. Elections are hardly ever held, their timing (as with the Musharraf's postponement [16] of the next to 18 February 2008) subject to manipulation, and even well motivated cadres are generally untrained. There are no professionals among them. Parties, like the country [17] itself, are personality-driven. Change the leadership, and the party either dissolves or has to refound itself.

Nobody - least of all the teenage aspirant [18] to his mother's throne, Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari - can be sure how it will all turn out. The hands of an assassin or the heart of an English rose may precipitate Bilawal's exit from the scene. But both the fact and the manner of his selection mean that the already slender hope of progress towards real democracy in Pakistan [19] has narrowed even further.

Pakistan's suicide impulse

The two weeks since Benazir Bhutto's [23] murder have been filled with a deluge of accusations, rumours, and suspicions about who was responsible - most of them free of the taint of evidence (most of which was in any case conveniently washed away by the authorities in the immediate aftermath). The key question - who did it? - is a multiple-choice one: you can take your pick from Pervez Musharraf [24] and his Punjabi cronies, to mavericks inside the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) that nobody in Pakistan really controls, to the *mullahs* of al-Qaida that the ISI had groomed for "foreign service" but ended up releasing in its own backyard.

But such an exercise would be as worthless as the "thorough investigation" of the 18 October bombing which Musharraf promised and which petered out soon after it began - a fate familiar to all Pakistani investigations. Benazir and her men had called in vain for "outside" security help. It was callously denied by a ruler supremely confident in his own incompetence. The end became nigh just about then.

Although the circumstances are very different, sinister parallels can be found between Benazir's assassination and her father's judicial murder in 1979. Both were victims of the same evil

generations, experiences, futures [6]" (2 August 2005)

"The Baluchi battlefield [7]" (1 February 2006)

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Irfan Husain, "Benazir Bhutto: the politics of murder [21]" (28 December 2007)

Fred Halliday, "The assassin's age: Pakistan in the world [22]" (31 December 2007)

contrivances of diabolical *mullah*-ism. While Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's [25] end was engineered by ambitious Salafist zealots for small ambitions, Benazir's assassination was brought about by another power-mad general serving (albeit, most likely, unknowingly) the universal aspirations of al-Qaida. True, al-Qaida itself was not born when the Islamists of Pakistan began conspiring to overthrow ZA Bhutto. But the goal was the same - return Pakistan and as much of the world as they could conquer to the fantasy, "Disneyland Islam [26]" of prelapsarian Arabia.

Nations die differently from human beings. A person's end may be lingering and marred by pain, but once in the ground flesh quickly turns to dust and even a hero of the moment passes into history. But when nations begin to die, especially one as deformed and deranged by religious zealotry as Pakistan, there is a danger that it will take others with it. Will Pakistan go alone into the pieces whence it came, to be gobbled by predatory neighbours, or will its chaos and ruination spread far and wide?

Its not too early to ask. There is a fire under the idea of Pakistan [27] - notwithstanding the now-familiar headlines about the normal [28] life of money-making, schooling and shopping continuing [29] amid the crisis. The convulsions without end are undermining the country's moorings, their daily enactment on the proliferating media channels sharpening its citizens' pain.

Pakistanis use an omnibus Urdu-Arabic-Persian word to describe the distracted state of mind that such repeated blows induce: *maatem*. The word conveys several meanings simultaneously, each one an invitation to a display: *maatem* is an occasion to mourn [30] loudly, to wail publicly, to beat the chest, to pull the hair, to rent the clothes. Nobody minds. Grief turns the mourner on himself or herself, making even self-harm acceptable.

Maatem is embedded in most Muslim cultures. *Shi'a* concentrate it all in the month of Muharram, commemorating the tortuous martyrdom of the prophet's grandson with chains and knives and whips. But they know when and where to stop. What is happening in Pakistan exceeds the limits of self-harm. The *maatem* for Benazir, as much as the choice [31] of her son and husband as her political heir, has exposed the depth of Pakistan's crisis rather than providing the sort of catharsis that might lead to forward movement.

The bountiful American largesse to the Pakistani army [32], the businesses the army runs [33] that sustain the luxurious lifestyles of the elite, can't conceal the fact that most Pakistanis are desperately deprived: not just of shared, public resources, but of a clear answer to a simple question - what is Pakistan *for*? They may be able to replace the burned buses, the torn bridges, the uprooted railway lines; but a combination of military power, dynastic politics, fervent religious dogma and extreme social inequality are the ingredients only of disintegration. It is sad to see a nation dying; it's an unspeakable tragedy when it is killing itself.

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