
From New Delhi

Benazir's return: What is U.S. role?

by Susan Maitra

A prominent Indian foreign policy commentator reported on return from a visit to Pakistan recently, that "informed" persons in that country, including notably American diplomats, believe that the political career of Pakistani President Zia ul-Haq is coming to a close.

The overwhelming popular response that Benazir Bhutto received since her return to Lahore from exile in Britain on April 10, would seem to lend credibility to such prognostications. Miss Bhutto inherited the leadership of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), the most popular political party in the country, when her father, who founded the party and brought it to power in 1972, was overthrown and judicially murdered by Zia ul-Haq.

Upwards of half a million people thronged the airport at Lahore when she arrived; subsequent party meetings and rallies have been the largest political demonstrations since martial law was lifted last Dec. 31.

Emphasizing that she will not launch a "frontal attack" on the Zia-Junejo government, and renouncing violence on the part of her party, Benazir has, however, called on the party-less civilian government to hold new elections on a party basis immediately. After today's demonstration of strength by the PPP, she said at her homecoming, General Zia should follow the lead of ousted Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos, and resign.

General Zia has stated that elections will not be held until 1990, as required by the new constitution. Prime Minister Junejo has meanwhile insisted that no curb will be placed on Benazir's political tours or on any lawful political activity. However, Benazir has to also contend with a deeply fragmented party, and open suspicion by its left wing over her American connections.

Before her return, Benazir paid a widely publicized visit (and not the first) to the United States, where she met with Senators Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) and Clayborn Pell (D-R.I.) and reportedly lunched with Rep. Stephen Solarz (D-N.Y.), chairman of the House Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Asia. PPP sources in London emphasized the significance of the latter meeting in light of Solarz's role in the ouster of President Marcos.

Benazir, according to Voice of America, has said that the purpose of her American visit was to inform the U.S. Congress of the human-rights situation in Pakistan in view of the

upcoming vote on the new \$4.2 billion Pakistan aid package, and to thank the State Department for arranging her release from house arrest last year. While in Washington, Benazir stated she was "greatly encouraged" by the U.S. role in removing dictators in Haiti and the Philippines.

Some circles in India and Pakistan are asking pointed questions. "Has Benazir Bhutto decided that no one can come to power in a Third World country without U.S. clearance?" is one of the queries making the rounds, according to the Lahore leftist weekly *Viewpoint*. The PPP reaction to the Libya crisis was cautious, these circles point out, in not opting for an immediate public demonstration. Further, they note, at the PPP-dominated rallies on Pakistan National Day, no reference was made to the visit of the U.S. Seventh Fleet to Karachi.

There are dark rumors of "various assurances" given to the United States by Benazir, according to reports in *Nawa-i-Waqt*. Some say that in expressing her support for a political settlement to the Afghan crisis, Benazir mentioned only withdrawal of Soviet troops and return of the refugees, and not guarantees of non-interference.

The State Department has always made it clear that it backs "the government of Pakistan" as distinct from General Zia, thus keeping its options open for a better bet. Benazir's own care in touching the relevant American, Saudi, and Soviet bases before returning to Pakistan has given weight to her claim to power.

Mistrust over the U.S. role in Benazir's strategy intersects a critical divide within the PPP, highlighted a year ago when leading party members opted to join separatist forces to launch the Sind/Baluch/Pakhtoon Liberation Front for provincial autonomy.

Punjab, where the PPP has its strongest base, has historically dominated Pakistan's military and federal machinery. PPP founder Bhutto, a Sindh, was careful to keep this domination intact. The deep and justified resentment in other provinces has, however, fed separatist currents that have by now gathered decisive force. It was these forces that wrecked the 1983 protests of the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy.

In India, Benazir's condemnation of Pakistan meddling in the troubles in the Indian state of Punjab—they forget that half of "Khalistan," the proposed independent Sikh state, is in Pakistan and that Lahore will be its capital, she said recently—has been well received. Likewise, her priority in improving relations with India. It is perhaps a moot point whether India's decision to take offense at a routine Pakistani verbal provocation and abruptly stall the normalization process undertaken with General Zia was taken on the assumption of a change in the offing.

But there is little doubt that the new promise advertised for a settlement in Afghanistan—Pakistani Foreign Minister Yaqub Khan recently claimed in Delhi that only one final point remained to be pinned down—is a sign of the Zia's regime's effort to keep one step ahead of the game.