

Role of Benazir Bhutto in Restoration of Democracy in Pakistan (1977-1988)Muhammad Ali Shaikh* Zahid Hussain Sahito[†] Stephen John[‡]

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Abstract

Benazir Bhutto has the distinction of being the first popularly elected female prime minister in any Muslim country in the world. But this distinction was preceded by her more than a decade long struggle against dictatorship of General Ziaul Haq. Aspiring to join diplomatic corps or media as a journalist, she entered in politics under the force of circumstances in 1977 after the government of her father, Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was toppled in a coup. Gradually, she occupied the center stage in the politics of Pakistan through her sheer struggle against dictatorship and for restoration of democracy in the country. In the process, she was subjected to repeated detentions, intimidation, coercion as well as physical and mental hardships to abandon her struggle. However, she was able to sustain those hardships and finally paved the way towards restoration of democracy in Pakistan in 1988.

Key Words: Role; Benazir Bhutto; and Restoration of Democracy in Pakistan (1977-1988)**Introduction**

Benazir Bhutto has the distinction of being the first popularly elected female prime minister in any Muslim country in the world. But this distinction was preceded by her more than a decade long struggle against dictatorship of General Ziaul Haq. Aspiring to join diplomatic corps or media as a journalist, she entered in politics under the force of circumstances in 1977 after the government of her father, Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was toppled in a coup. Gradually, she occupied the center stage in the politics of Pakistan through her sheer struggle against dictatorship and for restoration of democracy in the country. In the process, she was subjected to repeated detentions, intimidation, coercion as well as physical and mental hardships to abandon her struggle. However, she was able to sustain those hardships and finally paved the way towards restoration of democracy in Pakistan in 1988.

Objectives

The objective of this research was to study the role played by Benazir Bhutto in restoration of democracy during the period from 1977 to 1988, which is known as 'Decade of Dictatorship' in popular parlance. The study also took stock of the circumstances which helped a young female to assume such role of a prime leader in a society where females are still negatively discriminated.

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Research Questions

In order to achieve the objectives of this study, and to carry out a detailed analysis, following set of questions was formulated:

1. What were the circumstances that forced Benazir Bhutto's entry in politics of Pakistan?
2. What were the challenges that Benazir Bhutto faced during her struggle against dictatorship?
3. What were the strategies that she adopted for restoration of democracy and end of dictatorship?
4. What were the major outcomes of her struggle against the dictatorial regime from 1977-88?

Methodology

Given the subject of this study, the tools relating to archival and historical research under Qualitative Research Methodology were adopted. The researcher collected the data about the subject from published and unpublished material from various contemporary sources as well as conducted open-ended interviews with several persons who participated in the struggle against the dictatorship including Benazir Bhutto herself. An extensive study of news stories relating to political development taking place in Pakistan was also carried out. In this regard, the library of Daily Dawn Karachi was widely referred to as to collect data about the subject published during the period of the present study. All these resources were extracted using criterion sampling technique and correlated with other contemporary sources. This data was then analyzed through the application of qualitative research methods.

Discussion and Analysis

For ease of discussion and analysis, the period of the study has been divided into three parts: (a) Politics amidst personal tragedy (1977-1984), (b) Operation from London (1984-1986), (c) Return to Pakistan (1986), and (d) End of the dictatorial regime (1986-1988).

Personal Tragedy (1977-1984)

As a student at Harvard and Oxford universities, Benazir Bhutto aspired to be a diplomat. She "had not been a born politician. She had always wanted to be a diplomat and preferred intellectual debates to the corridors or smoked-filled rooms of power politics. But the killing of her father by the Ziaul Haq dictatorship changed her. She became a determined daughter ready to take on the military dictator who had eliminated her father; in the process she evolved into a political leader and inheritor of the Bhutto mantle" [\(Munoz 2014\)](#).

Pakistan witnessed a military coup d'état in the night between 4th and 5th July 1977 under the command of the then Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Ziaul Haq, which ended the government of her father, Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. The coup took place in the aftermath of election to the National and Provincial assemblies held in March 1977, and subsequent agitation of the opposition. "Approximately 17 million of the 31 million eligible voters cast their ballots on 7 March 1977, with PPP managing some 60 percent of the vote, but garnering 75 percent of the National Assembly seats... And although the PNA had managed a respectable 35 percent of the vote, it came out of elections with only 17 percent of the seats" [\(Ziring 1997\)](#).

The Opposition Pakistan National Alliance (PNA) did not accept the results of the elections and raised allegations of rigging in favor of Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP). Political efforts were made since March to find out a resolution to bring the country out of crises, but in vain. While country was going through this political upheaval, Benazir Bhutto returned back home from the United Kingdom after completing her studies at Oxford University. She was staying at her father's official residence in Rawalpindi, when in the early hours of 5th July, the Army under its chief General Ziaul Haq staged coup d'état. Recalling that fateful night, Benazir Bhutto wrote: "Wake up! Get dressed! Hurry!" my mother called

out sharply, rushing through my room to wake my sister. 'The Army's taken over! The Army's taken over!'" (Bhutto 1988)

She and her family were lucky in the sense that the perpetrators of the coup d'état did not kill the prime minister and his family immediately, as had happened in Bangladesh in 1975, where Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his family were executed then and there during the coup. One of the principal executioners of the coup, then Corps Commander Rawalpindi, General Chishti later wrote: "Just one recoilless rifle or tank could instantly kill the PM and his entire family... I have been blamed by some for not killing Mr. Bhutto the night the army took over. I have also been blamed by some for installing Gen. Zia as CMLA after the successful execution of the coup. I have no regrets on both counts" (Chishti, 1996)

While her father was taken into custody with other leaders from both government and Opposition, she and rest of her family members returned back to Karachi. General Ziaul Haq announced that the new free and fair elections would be held in the country in October 1977. After some time, her father was released from the 'protective custody' with other leaders who immediately got engaged in political activity in view of the ensuing elections. Being a charismatic popular leader, he pulled large crowds which were viewed as a threat to Martial Law, particularly to its main perpetrator, General Ziaul Haq. Within less than two months of the imposition of martial law, "in the early hours of 3rd September, he at his house in Karachi for the murder, on 10th November 1974, of Ahmed Raza Kasuri's father" (Raza 1997).

In view of the open hostility being shown by the martial law authorities towards her father and his party, there was no one who could emerge as a unanimous leader of the party during the absence of her father. Finally, the central executive council of the party decided to request her mother, Begum Nusrat Bhutto, to take up the responsibilities as Acting Chairperson of the party, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was released. She accepted the request and designated Benazir Bhutto as her political secretary. This is how her role in politics started. "My role was very junior one. Bhutto sahib along with the leadership of the party was arrested. We had to manage the election campaign and to contact the people... I remember being quite apprehensive of the crowds. Apprehensive not in the sense that there was so much pushing or so. It was not like that. There was lot of love and affection, a lot of support" (Bhutto 1999).

While her father was facing murder trial, she with her mother was leading the election campaign. She was able to develop an affinity with common people who were supporting her father and the size of the crowds of her public meetings kept on growing. Soon it became quite evident that an electoral victory could not be denied to PPP in an election, which was considered as a doomsday for the perpetrators of the coup. "Both [Bhutto and Zia] started hating and fearing each other. Known for his vindictive nature, Mr. Bhutto was expected to hold an eternal grudge against Zia for harming his reputation and image. The risk was not acceptable to General Zia. He wanted the trial of Mr. Bhutto completed before the elections were held" wrote General Khalid Mahmud Arif, who served as President General Ziaul Haq's Chief of Staff for seven years and Vice Chief of Army Staff for three more years (Arif 1995).

Accordingly, the Zia government announced the cancellation of the elections scheduled for October 16. Benazir Bhutto and her mother were arrested and re-arrested time and again and kept in various detention camps and places. The government focused its attention on murder trial of her father. The proceedings began in the Lahore High Court, where a judge having a personal grudge against Mr. Bhutto presided over as the 'acting' Chief Justice. National and international observers were astonished to observe the degree of hatred and animosity being shown by the presiding judge of the bench towards the accused. Finally, on 18th March 1978 the Lahore High Court declared him guilty of the murder and sentenced him to death (Schofield 1990).

Following decision of the Lahore High Court, an appeal was filed in the Supreme Court, where a nine-member bench of reconstituted Supreme Court heard it. It was being presumed that five of the nine judges could give verdict in favor of Mr. Bhutto. But, the proceedings prolonged and one of the senior judges retired, while the other was declared 'incapacitated' following his illness. Accordingly, in the split verdict of

the seven-member bench, three senior judges exonerated her father, while the other four found him guilty and upheld the death sentence. Later, General K. M. Arif observed that the “judgment might have been different if those two judges had still been on the bench at the time of decision” (Arif, 1995).

Benazir Bhutto and her mother were under solitary confinement at the time of the verdict of Supreme Court in her father’s case. They were allowed to meet Mr. Bhutto for last meeting with him on 3rd April at Rawalpindi Jail. They were allowed half an hour to meet him. “Half an hour. Half an hour to say good-bye to the person I love more than any other one in my life. The pain in my chest tightens into a vice. I must not cry. I must not break down and make my father’s ordeal any more difficult”. It was during this meeting where she committed with her father that she would continue with his mission and politics, in response to Mr. Bhutto’s advice to both of them to pick up their lives again after he was no more in this world. “I could never go,” was her response to her father in her last meeting with him (Bhutto, 1988).

Her father was executed in District Jail Rawalpindi in the early hours of 4th April 1979. “And with this was born, a determined, courageous, confident, fearless, and dauntless Benazir, the Daughter of the East. A Benazir, who would confront the all-powerful tyrant with the power of her will and would defeat him. A Benazir, who would be acclaimed as a great leader of the world, the one who makes history, and sets records... The night between the 3rd and 4th April saw an end to, and a beginning of a new Benazir. The past had given birth to the future” (Shaikh 2000).

Following the ‘judicial murder’ of her father, as it was later termed by the world press, public sympathy for her mother and herself increased tremendously as both the ladies had stood by Mr. Bhutto throughout his ordeal and had withstood all the hardships steadfastly. The party elected her mother as chairperson of the party, while Benazir Bhutto continued as political secretary to the chairperson. “I had to write letters, do the schedules, do the meetings, write the statements to be released on her behalf, and to assist her in her interviews” (Bhutto, 1999).

The following years witnessed Pakistan’s march towards political instability. In order to quell the unrest, the government arrested political workers, journalists, lawyers and other sections of society. Many of them were subjected to inhuman punishments including lashing on their bare backs in open public. In addition to political unrest, the hallmarks of this era were heightened sectarianism, drug abuse and division of the nation on ethnic basis. “His repressive rule opened the floodgates to drug-trafficking and the widespread ethnic and sectarian violence, which are the hallmarks of the so-called ‘Kalashnikov Culture,’” (Talbot 1998).

She and her party began efforts to form an alliance with other political parties on main objective of the restoration of democracy in the country. Though she was mostly under detentions, contacts were made with the leadership of other political parties. Finally, these efforts bore fruit when a political alliance known as Movement for Restoration of Democracy (MRD) was formed, with PPP as one of the leading components, in February 1981. However, a month later, in March, a PIA plane was hijacked under mysterious circumstances, the brunt of which was placed on her party workers, many of whom were arrested. This delayed the launch of any movement for some time. In the meantime, her mother was diagnosed with lung cancer and was allowed to proceed abroad for treatment in November 1982, mainly through international persuasions. “When Begum sahiba became ill and she had to go abroad for the treatment, a steering committee was formed and I was designated as the acting chairperson” (Bhutto, 1999).

It was during her serving as acting chairperson of the PPP that the MRD launched a full-fledged agitation movement across the country from 14th August 1983. Though she was under arrest, she released an appeal to the people of Pakistan, in the name of her mother, asking them to rise against the dictatorship of General Ziaul Haq and fully participate in the movement. Though it was a country-wide affair, but the epicenter of this movement was in her home province, Sindh. The government came with repressive measures, which resulted in widespread and unprecedented violence even in the rural areas of Sindh. The then military governor of Sindh admitted himself that in the opening three weeks of the struggle, about two thousand

people had been arrested, 189 killed and 126 injured (Talbot, 1998). However, being located mostly in the rural areas of Sindh, the movement could not sustain for long in view of repressive actions of the government.

Putting Pressure from Abroad (1984-1986)

By then, she had developed a serious infection in her ear. Under pressure from the international community over her continued detention, Benazir Bhutto was to proceed abroad on medical grounds in January 1984. She underwent an operation at London. Her mother wanted her to join her in Switzerland, but she chose London to put her stay as she thought that it was easier to mobilize international community as well as her party cadre from London as compared to Switzerland. "There were many Pakistanis living there . . . London is a central place, so I decided to stay there" (Bhutto, 1999).

With this started yet another crucial phase of her political life: a life in exile. Her apartment in Barbican was converted into the launching ground of her movement. A group of PPP sympathizers as well as some Pakistani students studying in London came forward to help her. This is how a team was formed to work for restoration of democracy in Pakistan. She formed a secret network of her supporters and political workers in Pakistan to provide vital information regarding human rights abuse. The group in London then wrote articles for newspapers highlighting to state of human rights in Pakistan, posted letters to world leaders and met important people. These efforts bore fruit and awareness started dawning amongst the influential circles in world about realities of dictatorial rule as well as human right abuses in Pakistan (Shaikh 2000).

By the end of 1984, when both the domestic and international pressure increased, General Ziaul Haq announced holding elections for the national and provincial assemblies in February 1985, but on non-party basis. The political reason for this move was to keep her PPP from contesting the elections as it was feared that the party may win the elections. The government was confident that about 200 members of National Assembly, elected through non-party basis would be more amenable to the regime than the ones elected through a party nomination. However, on the face of it, a Commission appointed by the government under an obliging religious scholar declared that the political parties were repugnant to Islam. The Government accepted the recommendations and banned the political parties to contest the elections (Talbot, 1998).

But, before the elections, in order to obtain legitimacy for his rule, General Zia decided to hold an extra-constitutional referendum, the wording of which was drafted in such a way that General Zia and Islam were made synonyms. Wording of the referendum proposition read as: "Whether the people of Pakistan endorse the process initiated by Gen. Ziaul Haq, the President of Pakistan, to bring the laws of Pakistan in conformity with the injunctions of Islam as laid down in the Holy Quran and Sunnah of the Holy Prophet (Peace be upon him) and for the preservation of ideology of Pakistan, for the continuation and consolidation of the process for the smooth and orderly transfer of power to the elected representatives of the people." As is evident it was made difficult for the voters to oppose the General without appearing to vote against Islam (Shaikh 2000).

Her PPP and most of other political parties decided to boycott the referendum. The government issued proclamation declaring any opposition to referendum a criminal offence. Most of the people recorded their disapproval by not turning to the polling stations on 19th December, the referendum day. The world media reported and showed deserted streets all over the country on the day. However, the official Election Commission declared that the proposition had secured 97.71 per cent affirmative votes (Talbot, 1998). The General translated this affirmative vote to the proposition as his election as President of Pakistan for next five years.

Subsequent to referendum, elections to the assemblies were held. Benazir Bhutto herself was interested in taking part in the elections through proxies, as affiliation with parties was not allowed. She was of the view that no field should be left open to Gen Ziaul Haq to manipulate. But, being out of country,

she depended much on the party leadership operating inside Pakistan. And as most of them suggested to boycott the polls, she went ahead with that line (Bhutto, 1999). During the conduct of these elections, in addition to their being on the non-party basis, the candidates were also denied the right to hold public meetings, take out processions, and even the use of loudspeakers during their election campaign. Because of these aspects, the elections were dubbed as “deaf and dumb” (Rizvi 1986).

One drawback of the elections on non-party basis was that there was no consideration of any national program before the voters, who only considered their tribal and family considerations while voting for the candidates. This resulted in neo-rich industrial and commercial elites finding their way to the national legislative assemblies through an effective use of their money. Feudal lords came as usual (Waseem 1985). In the aftermath of such elections, General Ziaul Haq interviewed the candidates for the position of prime minister and selected Muhammad Khan Junejo, a soft-spoken Sindhi who had worked under him earlier as Railway Minister after the coup. The federal cabinet as well as provincial chief ministers were too selected in same manner. The assemblies started functioning and all the civilian governments were formed by March 1985. But the martial law was not lifted from the country till 30th of December that year, after the parliament passed 8th Constitutional Amendment, which endorsed all the acts of martial law since 1977 as well as gave President the powers to dissolve the assemblies, dismiss the governments, appoint the governors and armed forces chiefs. In addition to these measures, the new government agreed to General Ziaul Haq keeping the position of army chief as well (Shaikh, 2000).

This would remain to the lasting credit of Prime Minister Muhammad Khan Junejo that despite all these obstacles, he started working to broaden political space accorded to him. The first step was to form a party under the title of Pakistan Muslim League (PML) within the assemblies as it was very difficult to operate in a democratic system without a party. “The PML led by Junejo rightly deserves the credit for the withdrawal of martial law and emergency as well as restoration of fundamental rights and the 1973 Constitution. A new democratic era restarted in Pakistan from January 1986, after the lifting of martial law in the country. Civil liberties were restored and freedom of expression was ensured. The Junejo government attached great importance to development activities such as construction of roads, hospitals, schools and rural development” (Mahmood 2002).

It was in these circumstances that Benazir Bhutto decided to return to Pakistan and struggle for restoration of full democracy from within the country. The date of her return was chosen to be 10th April 1986 and place the heart of Pakistan’s politics and power, Lahore (Badar 1999). In London, Bashir Riaz and other volunteers of her team coordinated with international media to cover her return to Pakistan (Riaz, 1999). As these efforts about 150 foreign journalists and media-persons booked their seats to Pakistan. Before her departure from London’s Heathrow airport, a large number of international radio and television channels, including the famous Channel 4, relied her interview and statements highlighting her past life and struggle against dictatorship. A couple of international television networks had arranged for live telecast of the day’s proceeding via satellite (Dawn 1986).

In Lahore, the government agencies took measures to minimize the impact of her return. Daily Dawn reported from Lahore: “Many PPP workers from all over the country have already reached here, while others are still arriving. However, cases have been reported of PPP workers being checked on their way to Lahore. PPP workers arriving from the NWFP and Sindh told Dawn that a large number of their colleagues had been stopped from entering the Punjab. Buses were also stopped at Sadiqabad where route permits of four buses, carrying about 250 PPP workers, were withheld. Similar incidents have been reported from Sialkot, Rawalpindi and Multan. At Shakkargarh four workers were arrested by the police for raising “objectionable” slogans, the sources added. Meanwhile, security at Lahore airport has been strengthened. Hundreds of policemen drawn from all over the province have been deployed there. All entries to the airport have been closed. According to reliable sources, no more than a hundred party leaders would be allowed to enter the airport to receive Miss Bhutto” (Dawn, 1986).

But Lahore went to festive mood to accord her warm welcome. "In the walled city of Lahore, mothers who had lost their sons in the MRD's agitation were garlanded and presented with sweets. Young girls lit candles in memory of their lost brothers and many among the unemployed borrowed indiscriminately for the celebrations in hope that they would soon find employment and be able to pay back their loans. Printing presses worked through the night to produce posters and handbills. Self-styled revolutionary poets, who could until then recite their poetry only to extremely limited circles, and that too in hiding, openly sat by the roadside with crowds of excited party workers gathered around to applaud their verses. Throughout the night, groups of workers and followers made their way to the airport with torches held aloft. By morning, hardly any traffic signal was left functional since most were smashed by enthusiastic in a final gesture of defiance" wrote columnist in Daily Dawn (Mirza 1986).

On her return, she was greeted by a very large number of people. Righting about the size of the crowd, popular columnist of Daily Dawn who used to write with pseudo name of Lahori wrote: "The cameras could not capture it all, nor can all the superlatives in the dictionary. I will, therefore, use humble words. I have not seen anything like it before. Benazir Bhutto had the city at her feet the moment she landed at the Lahore Airport on Thursday... The night before her arrival, we were discussing how large a crowd she would attract. I told a friend working with a Gulf newspaper that I expected something like 150,000. I have never been wider off the mark. I don't know where they came from but they were there. They were there at the airport, they were there at the Fortress Stadium, they were there on the Mall all day, and they were there at the Data Sahib's mausoleum. And above all, they were there at the Iqbal Park in larger numbers than you could count... When the MRD public meeting was held here on January 29, I had said that Mochi Gate had spoken, and when Mochi Gate speaks, the city moves, the Punjab moves, Pakistan moves" (Mirza, 1986).

It was just unprecedented in the history of the country that a leader had been welcomed like this. "Even Mr. Bhutto had not commanded crowd's half as big at the height of his popularity," noted Zafar Iqbal Mirza, popular columnist of Daily Dawn who used to write under pseudo name of Lahori. She came out of the airport at about half past seven in the morning and boarded on an open truck with the help of a wooden ladder. "I gripped the notes for my speech as I looked at the rickety stair leading to the platform which had been built on the top of the truck for me to ride," she recalled of that moment. "I sometimes had nightmares of a stairway I didn't want to climb, but had to. Suddenly that very stair was in front of me and hundreds of expectant eyes were waiting to watch me climb it... I put my foot on the first step and took a deep breath. 'Bismillah,' I said to myself. 'In the name of God, I begin'" (Bhutto, 1988).

After several hours her caravan could finally reach the place of her address, Minar-e-Pakistan grounds. In her much-awaited address, she said that the "PPP was opposed to obscurantism and oppression. It wanted enlightenment, progress, freedom and justice, the causes for which PPP had been fighting for the last nine years." She declared the gathering, as 'Awami Referendum' in which the people had given their verdict in favor of holding fresh elections and the restoration of genuine democracy (Dawn, 1986).

Towards Restoration of Democracy (1986-1988)

This was the beginning of an end for Zia ul Haq. The time passed in fast forward. She addressed a number of rallies. Everywhere the demand echoed for holding the fresh elections and transfer of power to the genuine representative of the people. International media and influential political forums also supported the country's surge for democracy. As the pressure mounted, the fissures and cracks developed in the otherwise smooth relationship of General Zia and his 'chosen' Prime Minister Junijo. Exactly two years after she had landed at Lahore, on 10th April 1988, a massive explosion at Ojhri Camp, a transit arms dump for Afghan Mujahideen exploded.²⁵ With this exploded also the smooth relationship between the President and the Prime Minister. Within next six weeks, the relationship deteriorated to such an extent that, on 29th May 1988 Zia dismissed Junijo government and dissolved assemblies under article 58-(2) (b) of the

amended Constitution.²⁶ The country was back to square one. In the meantime, in December 1987, she had her marriage with Asif Ali Zardari at Karachi. Though, this was her private affair, but being the popular leader of the masses, people made it an occasion to celebrate.

With the dissolution of the assemblies, the General wanted to reverse whole of the process back to 1977 again. He chose himself to head the 'caretaker' cabinet, as no caretaker Prime Minister was appointed. Again, the new political dispensation wrapped itself in the cloak of religion, announcing the legislative supremacy of Sharia in the Country. The talk started about introduction of an Islamic economic system. It was also being heard again that the parliamentary system of democracy was against the teaching of Islam.

Finally, after much ado, the General announced that the elections for national and provincial assemblies would be held again on the non-party basis, on 16th November. He perhaps believed the reports of his agents that Benazir, who was expecting her first baby by the last quarter of the year, would be unable to mobilize due to her convalesce period coinciding with the time of elections.

However, the course of history, and her life changed when, on 17th August, the General, while returning back from the Tamewall firing range, where he had gone to witness the US-made M1 Abrams tanks, died in a plane crash. The US Ambassador Arnold Raphael and the Chief of the US Military mission in Pakistan, Brigadier General Herbert Wasson, also accompanied him in his last journey. The Hercules C-130 plane detailed for the VIP duty, just a few minutes after taking off on its return journey from Bahawalpur to Islamabad, nose-dived to the ground, and incinerated with such intensity that the remains of the passenger were not identifiable. The General disappeared somewhere in between the earth and sky.

This ended a nightmarish chapter of her life.

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