

ISAS Brief

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Forthcoming Pakistan Elections: A Profile on Benazir Bhutto

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On 10 April 1986, over a million people gave a rousing reception to Ms Benazir Bhutto when she returned from political exile. On 18 October 2007, she returned after another period of exile, but this time, she was nearly killed by a horrific bomb attack which claimed over one hundred lives. Ms Bhutto had come back to a very different Pakistan from the one in which she grew up, and which both she and her father had led as Prime Ministers at different periods.

Ms Bhutto, the eldest of four siblings, was born on 21 June 1953 in Karachi, Pakistan to one of Pakistan's most prominent political families. Her grandfather, Sir Shah Nawaz Bhutto, was Prime Minister of the Indian state of Junagadh before Partition, and her father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was a wealthy Sindhi landlord and founder of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP). Mr Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was also the first democratically elected leader of Pakistan until he was overthrown in a coup by the military regime of General Zia ul-Haq in 1977. Ms Bhutto's mother, Nusrat Bhutto, is of Iranian descent while on the paternal side the origins of the Bhuttos are traced to the Arain tribe, though some classify the Bhuttos as Raputs. The Bhuttos moved to Sindh from Sirsa, formerly part of the undivided Punjab and now part of the state of Haryana in India. Ms Bhutto had an arranged marriage with Mr Asif Ali Zardari, a wealthy Sindhi landlord and businessman, in 1987 and the couple has three children.

While this background of political aristocracy and wealth no doubt helped Ms Bhutto's political career, her success has also been due to her charisma and intelligence as well as her resilience in the face of personal tragedies and challenges. Educated at both Harvard and Oxford universities, she was elected President of the Oxford debating society, and at Harvard she was elected to *Phi Beta Kappa*, the oldest American society recognising academic excellence in liberal arts and science. However, this life of privilege was not without pain. Her father was executed by General Zia in 1979, an event which was a turning point in Ms Bhutto's life, as it thrust her into the political limelight. One year later, she had to cope with the mysterious death of her youngest brother, Shah Nawaz Bhutto, and in 1996 her elder

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brother, Mir Murtaza Bhutto, was killed in a police encounter. Both the Bhutto brothers had adopted a more radical approach to fight General Zia. They spent most of their years in exile after their father's death and founded Al-Zulfikar, which was declared a terrorist organisation by General Zia.

Thus, even though Pakistan is a patriarchal society, with Ms Bhutto's brothers out of the running, she became the bearer of the Bhutto legacy. She was placed under house arrest, imprisoned and eventually exiled to London in 1984. General Zia's death in a plane crash in 1988 cleared the way for her to assume leadership of the country and on 2 December 1988, Ms Bhutto was sworn in as the first woman Prime Minister of Pakistan. At 35 years of age, she symbolised the hopes of the people of Pakistan. With her dynamism, modernity and democratic credentials, she was like a breath of fresh air to Pakistani politics, long dominated by male politicians and the military.

However, despite so much going for her, Ms Bhutto stumbled politically. Although she received an overwhelming mandate in 1988, her first political term was short-lived. Less than two years later, on 6 August 1990, she fell out with the army and was dismissed by the President on charges of corruption, abuse of power and mismanagement. Mr Nawaz Sharif, her political rival, replaced her as Prime Minister. For the next decade, Pakistan experienced a type of revolving door politics, with Mr Sharif and Ms Bhutto alternately dismissed and returned as leaders of the country, until General Musharraf's coup in 1999.

Ms Bhutto's Achilles heel has been the corruption charges against her and her husband, Mr Zardari, who was a Federal Minister for Investment and Environment in her government. They have been accused of skimming millions of dollars through illegal commissions and kickbacks involving government contracts and approvals. Mr Zardari's notoriety was such that he was known as "Mr. Ten Percent." Mr Zardari spent eight years in jail and was released in 2004, with rumours that his release was linked to talks between Ms Bhutto and General Musharraf. In 2003, a Swiss court found the couple guilty of money laundering, and in 2006, following a request from Islamabad, Interpol issued notices of arrest for the couple to its 184 member countries. In 2007, following negotiations with General Musharraf for a power sharing agreement, widely believed to be brokered by the United States, Ms Bhutto was given an amnesty for her alleged offences.

Essentially, the power-sharing deal was for her co-operation with General Musharraf in return for the dropping of the corruption charges against her and the amendment of laws to allow her a possible third term as Prime Minister. However, the deal has apparently come unstuck and Ms Bhutto now appears to be working with her arch rival, Mr Nawaz Sharif. This flip-flopping may cost Ms Bhutto some credibility. The corruption charges, her dalliance with Western powers and her political opportunism in doing deals with a military dictator have compromised her as an honest defender of democracy in Pakistan.

Nonetheless, Ms Bhutto remains a popular leader in Pakistan and her party enjoys widespread support in the country. The Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) is a relatively liberal, and left of centre party in Pakistan, and is especially popular with women, the poor and the underprivileged. The PPP's key pillars include Islam, democracy, social equity and people power. In its manifesto for the forthcoming elections of 2008, Ms Bhutto has revived a commitment to promote egalitarian changes on behalf of the poor and also taken an enlightened position on *inter alia* combating environmental degradation; freedom of press and media; empowerment of women and minority groups; improvements in health, housing,

and education including the Madrassahs; and reforms at various government levels including the local government, civil service, police and the judiciary. In addition to this, she has pledged to fight for the return of democracy to Pakistan and to combat terrorism in all forms. If the forthcoming elections are free and fair, the PPP can be expected to be the largest or the second largest party in parliament.

Unlike her triumphant homecoming in 1986, Ms Bhutto faces a different Pakistan today, which presents far greater challenges both to her political ambitions and personal safety. Pakistan is extremely volatile - it is far more radicalised by conservative, Islamist forces as well as ethnic separatists, and has been tottering on the brink of a civil war due to President Musharraf's actions over the past few months. Whatever her fate in the upcoming elections in January 2008, there is a sense of déjà vu, as once again, the expectations of a nation are on her shoulders. This time round, the weight of the nation has increased. Whether it proves too great for Ms Bhutto remains to be seen.

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