

ISAS Brief

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Ms Benazir Bhutto's Will¹

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I was badly shaken by the news of the brutal assassination of Ms Benazir Bhutto. It brought back sad memories of the way Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and his descendents have had to pay in blood for coming into conflict with the establishment. In the several interviews that followed on Singapore television, I was constantly asked what implications this would have for democracy and the survival of Pakistan. My response was that, in her death, she may have created a greater basis for the return of civilian rule and democracy.

But the news that she wrote a will that made her husband Asif Ali Zardari her successor and thus chairperson of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) induced a depression, from which I have not yet managed to release myself. There is another version that she has named her son Bilawal, 19, as her successor, but her husband will play that role on his behalf until Bilawal is ready to take over. Even this makes no sense.

If the reports published in the newspapers are to be believed, only portions of the will related to the PPP were read out by Zardari. The argument given for not sharing the whole text with the PPP central committee was that it contained personal matters, especially those relating to the distribution of property.

Zardari, it is reported, was surprised that he and not their son Bilawal had been nominated as her political successor. He acted wisely, and instead declared Bilawal the successor while he will be the regent until Bilawal is ready to take up the responsibility of lifelong chairperson of the PPP. Bilawal will now be called Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari.

Mr Babar Awan, a Zardari loyalist and a lawyer who has defended him in Pakistani courts, correctly argued in a British Broadcasting Corporation interview that a person should be treated as innocent until proven guilty. He asserted that the Pakistani courts failed to find evidence that could prove Zardari guilty. He was kept in jail for some 11 years, of which eight were a long spell, he said and, therefore he should be treated as innocent.

The problem with this argument is that it can boomerang. Was it not the decision of the Supreme Court, which found Zulfikar Ali Bhutto guilty of ordering the murder of a political

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opponent and ordered his execution? Should we not, then, accept that proven guilty by the highest court in Pakistan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto should be considered a criminal?

Mr Awan knows, and we know, that the state machinery in Pakistan is open to manipulation and gross abuse of authority, and this has infected even the judiciary. The hanging of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was judicial murder. Equally, the decision to clear Zardari could be a political acquittal. In the corridors of power in Pakistan, intrigues, conspiracies, and much worse happen all the time.

Most recently Aitzaz Ahsan, a senior PPP leader, who is still under house arrest for leading uncompromisingly the campaign for the reinstatement of the deposed chief justice and other judges of the Supreme Court, gained national fame. Ms Bhutto did nothing to get him released before deciding to contest the elections.

She felt comfortable in the company of sycophants. But while sycophants may be in a majority in the PPP central committee it also contains people with backgrounds in trade unions and peasants' rights movement, progressive intellectuals, distinguished lawyers and many decent people. They are surely going to wonder why they should submit to the leadership of a man whose abuse of power and authority is proverbial.

As far as the forthcoming election is concerned, there is no doubt that the PPP is riding on the crest of a massive wave of public sympathy that will pay rich dividends this time in terms of seats in the legislatures. But the PPP cannot remain for long a mass party of the poor wedded to social democracy and yet represent a decadent type of feudalism when it comes to inner-party democracy and leadership.

One can even wonder if she did this in the best interest of her party or to reward Zardari for something that we will never know. She won great sympathy when her assassination took place. It is in the very nature of human beings that they do not approve of cruelty and injustice. I found taxi drivers, journalists, restaurant waiters, retired people and others in Singapore sad and hurt when the news of her death reached them. But I also noticed that the same people were completely bewildered when they learnt that she had declared the PPP an exclusive preserve of her immediate family. It should not be surprising if a similar reaction takes place in Pakistan at some stage.

The PPP can only survive in the 21st century as a mass party of the poor that upholds democracy and social justice if it can provide clean and honest leadership. In the era of globalisation and information revolution abuse of public office will no longer be possible to hide, and in Pakistan the free press and media have proven their mettle. On the other hand, Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari has all the right to achieve leadership on merit. For that he does not need a testament from his mother.

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