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Burden of Proof:

Benazir Bhutto Convinced the West that She Can Save Pakistan. But Can She Convince Her Own People?

By Nicholas Schmidle

NOVEMBER 2007

After I wrote this newsletter, Benazir Bhutto was assassinated in Rawalpindi on December 27th. The news triggered days of intense rioting throughout the country. When the violence subsided, President Pervez Musharraf delayed parliamentary elections, originally scheduled for January 8, until February 18. Bhutto's party, the Pakistan People's Party, won by a wide margin, and is now looking to form a government.

BENAZIR BHUTTO ENCHANTS the western press. The Harvard- and Oxford-educated former prime minister knows what audiences in New York, Washington, and London want to hear. Her speeches even sound saturated in the kind of "War on Terror" rhetoric that's been the Bush administration's clarion call. Speaking to the media on the day police placed her on virtual house arrest in Islamabad, Bhutto described Pakistan as "nuclear-armed and pivotal for regional peace." Western analysts make this point on a regular basis, but I've never heard another Pakistani politician discuss the country's nuclear arsenal in terms suggesting that such weapons could be destabilizing. While talking to an American audience months ago, Bhutto went one more, suggesting that, if returned to power, she might even hand Dr. A.Q. Khan over to Western intelligence agencies for questioning. The Urdu press in Pakistan called Bhutto a traitor and

A Bhutto supporter stands on the roof of the PPP headquarters in Islamabad on the day the PPP announced Bhutto's return date.

PPP supporters spraying foam into the air to celebrate news that Bhutto planned to return on October 18.

blasphemer for these statements.

Yet there was great delight, and hope, in the days before Bhutto returned to Karachi on October 18, after eight years in exile.

I flew down to Karachi the day before her scheduled arrival. The media melee was already in full swing. On the front lawn of the Karachi Press Club, scores of foreign and local journalists crowded around a table where four people from the publicity wing of Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) issued all-access press passes. Hacks milled about in the garden, oversized press passes dangling around their necks, swapping trade secrets about the best way to file stories in a mob. Foreign journalists swarmed the Press Club. Why? Because as the Karachi-based *Dawn* newspaper recently wrote, "Benazir Bhutto is good copy." And on October 18, the next day, Bhutto and company were to converge on Karachi, Pakistan's most populous — and troubled — city. The smell of jasmine trees and sense of giddiness mingled in the air.

While registration continued through the afternoon and television crews unpacked their kits, I headed to Lyari, a slummy neighborhood in Karachi where sewer water puddles in the streets, foot pedestrians are watchful to avoid random bags of trash flying out of fourth-story windows, and members of the Bhutto family are revered like saints. Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, founder of the PPP, former prime minister, and Benazir's father, drew legions of supporters in Lyari during the 1960s and 1970s with his populist politics and slogan of *roti, kapre, makan* — "food, clothing, and shelter." Abdul Wahid, a dark-skinned man in his mid-50s, told me that he'd been a founding member of the PPP and would guarantee Bhutto got the homecoming she — and her father's memory — deserved. "People are coming in cars, on bicycles, even some on foot. *Inshallah*, we are going to flood Karachi tomorrow," Wahid said.

The surge of excitement was understandable since there is hardly anything else worth getting excited about in Pakistan these days. But I wondered if there weren't some mixed emotions about Bhutto's return, considering that a deal between her and President Pervez Musharraf, which involved waving corruption charges against Bhutto, made the whole thing possible. For the past eight years, the PPP had been calling Musharraf a dog and demanding his ouster; now, they were suddenly looking to form a coalition government with him. According to Maula Baksh, another Lyari resident, the deal was not going to hurt Bhutto because, frankly, her vote bank — the rural poor — wasn't caught up with developments in Islamabad — and even if they were, they wouldn't

A billboard in Lyari showing Benazir Bhutto's face paired with Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, her father.

care. Bhutto's support, he added, had more to do with the mythic, untainted legacy of her father than anything she had done. "Take a pillar, put it in a public square, and write Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's name on it," Baksh said. "People will vote for that pillar."

In the days leading up to Benazir Bhutto's return, the PPP leadership showed that it saw the logic in Baksh's statement. They festooned the city with the red, black, and green tri-color flags of the PPP, and re-plastered every billboard around the airport terminal, the procession route, and throughout Lyari with portraits of Benazir's face — paired beside her father's. On Thursday morning at 11, three hours before Bhutto's scheduled arrival time, I hopped on the back of a motorcycle and made my way toward the Karachi airport. Checkpoints, huge crowds, and shipping containers, turned sideways to block traffic, made car travel impossible. Along the way, massive speakers pumped out Bhutto-themed songs, while men, with PPP flags wrapped around their shoulders like superhero capes, twirled and gyrated to drumbeats and mesmerizing synthesizer riffs.

By midday, the tropical sun sizzled pale foreigners and a high SPF became nearly as coveted as a Bhutto sighting. The heat was even enough to turn some PPP leaders away. Syeda Abida Hussain, a senior party member who had arrived at 9 a.m., yelled into her phone, over the blaring music, to her daughter on the other end: "We got here too early!" Her tone sounded desperate, like an embattled platoon commander calling back to headquarters. "Your father and I are going home to park in front of the telly." Before she retreated, I asked Hussain whether Bhutto had compromised too much by returning to Pakistan as part of a deal with Musharraf. Hussain and her husband, a politician and feudal lord from Punjab, had been fixtures at the anti-Musharraf demonstrations over the previous months.

Could they continue to chant for Musharraf's ouster when he was the one who facilitated Bhutto's return?

"I still say he should go…," Hussain replied, abruptly correcting herself and cutting off mid-sentence. This was Bhutto's big day, after all. Hussain thought better of clouding it with controversy. Adjusting her tone to sound diplomatic and refined (Hussain previously served as Pakistan's Ambassador to the United Nations), she continued, "Politics is the art of the possible. And Benazir has proven herself to be a great politician who has managed the situation. Despite the last-minute pleading of Musharraf to delay her return, Benazir decided to return home. She is getting a tremendous reception. Bigger than she could have expected!"

At half-past three, Bhutto finished all the obligatory rituals of an exile coming home — shedding tears, kissing the ground, saying a prayer — and boarded the up-armored, double-decker, Bhutto-mobile where she was to spend the day. On the top of the vehicle was a small, emerald-green enclosure made of bulletproof glass, though

PPP supporters dancing in the streets of Karachi.

Bhutto preferred to stand out in the open, waving to her people. Hundreds of thousands of them showed up. PPP workers crowded the streets and hung from tree branches to get a glimpse of their leader's face. Few of them had any idea Bhutto was in cahoots with Musharraf; they only knew that their leader was home.

Music pumped from huge speakers attached to the Bhutto-mobile. The mood was festive. Bhutto's top lieutenants surrounded her on the truck, chatting on their phones and glowing at the seeming prospect of how Bhutto's presence revived their political fortunes. (The fact that they could talk on their phones, however, reminded everyone that the electronic jammers, designed to prevent close-range detonation of bombs, were not working properly, foreshadowing things to come.) After months of speculation that Bhutto's deal with Musharraf had saved her, but killed her party, the huge turnout showed that the PPP remained a major political force in the country. And regardless of whether or not you liked Bhutto, you couldn't help feeling joy for her, her party, her supporters, and Pakistan.

A few hours later, the Bhutto float had barely crept a mile. Her flotilla was supposed to travel another nine miles through Karachi, before winding up at the tomb of Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan. I decided, along with four other reporters, to jump off the flatbed truck I had been riding on, in search of a car that could take us back to our separate hotels. Sunburned and hungry, I craved a few hours' rest. Since my hotel was situated along the route where Bhutto's convoy was scheduled to pass, I figured that I would hear the car horns and music in the middle of the night, and could then walk downstairs, out the front door of the hotel, and rejoin the procession.

But such sounds of joy never came. A little after midnight, two explosions rocked Bhutto's convoy, killing at least 140 people, and injuring hundreds more. Most of those who died were young men who had volunteered to guard Bhutto. I saw them earlier in the day, wearing tight, white t-shirts pulled over their shalwar kameezes. The t-shirts read "Jamsaraan Benazir," which means, roughly, "Those willing to die for Benazir." The explosions scattered chunks of burnt human flesh onto people's clothes and hair. Neither Bhutto, nor any of the PPP's top leadership, was seriously injured.

The bombing forced Bhutto to reconsider her comeback strategy. The PPP has planned a number of massive public rallies across Pakistan. Yet, with suicide bombers blowing themselves up less than 12 hours after Bhutto landed in Pakistan, that now seemed like a suicidal endeavor. The government blamed al-Qaeda-linked terrorists for the attack, and announced that the security risk of holding large rallies might force the government to ban such gatherings. (As Bhutto was making her final preparations to return, a top Taliban commander in South Waziristan reportedly said that, "Our suicide bombers

Crowds gathering in front of the terminal in Karachi, waiting for Bhutto's plane to arrive. Cameramen are standing on the roof of buses in the background.

Bhutto (back turned, in green with white headscarf), standing on the roof of the Bhutto-mobile. Hours after the convoy began moving, you can still see the airport control tower in the background.

will be waiting in Karachi to greet her." After the bombing, however, the commander denied any involvement.) Bhutto blamed the government. She alleged that a few of Musharraf's allies were behind the attack, people whose political fortunes would be most adversely affected by her resurgence. She also demanded an international inquiry, and said she wouldn't accept the results of the investigation unless the FBI or Scotland Yard got involved. Her demand went over well in Washington and London. Officials in Islamabad rejected it outright.

THE BOMBING RATTLED BHUTTO and her aides. All the euphoria and high hopes of October 18 disappeared. Even the most cavalier journalists admitted that covering big Bhutto events in the future carried a serious security risk. The Bhutto camp seemed paralyzed. What to do next? Proceed headlong into the Punjab, even at the risk of another suicide bomber killing hundreds of party workers? Or watch the novelty and excitement surrounding Bhutto's return gradually slip away while she sat in her Karachi home?

On Friday, November 2, Bhutto's party announced that she had flown to Dubai to meet her husband and children, who had stayed behind when Bhutto arrived in Karachi two weeks earlier. Her trip to Dubai couldn't have come at an odder time; rumors circulated that Musharraf might declare Martial Law or a State

Supporters hanging from tree branches to catch a glimpse of Bhutto.

of Emergency ahead of a decision in the Supreme Court. The court was hearing a case that could have declared Musharraf ineligible to be president.

The next day, my wife, two friends and I drove a half-hour outside of Islamabad for an afternoon of horseback riding. We had no sooner tied up the horses, unpacked our picnic lunch and tapped a box of wine (don't laugh, it's the best we could find), when the phones started ringing. Musharraf had actually done it. A state of emergency. Roads around Islamabad were being blocked. Phones were expected to go down. All private television channels were taken off the air. We rushed back into the city. The next day, Bhutto also rushed back from Dubai.

BHUTTO AND MUSHARRAF'S SO-CALLED DEAL has always seemed like theater, only no one could tell what was really happening. In other words, it all seemed staged, but exactly how? In the first days after Musharraf declared emergency rule, police rounded up thousands of Musharraf's political opponents. Bhutto repeatedly denied that she had any special arrangement with Musharraf, but her people were given free movement while everyone else, besides the hardcore Musharraf loyalists, were either in jail or on house arrest. As the week wore on, however, Bhutto grew more and more emboldened. On Wednesday, PPP workers clashed with police in front of the Parliament Lodges, the apartment complex reserved for members of the national assembly. Bhutto declared that on Friday, November 9, she would lead a rally in Rawalpindi against Musharraf's emergency rule. This left Musharraf with a choice: allow Bhutto and her people to gather without hindrance, at the risk of sparking a mass-movement against him (so far, the demonstrations had been small and non-threatening), or shut down Islamabad and Rawalpindi, thus guaranteeing that neither Bhutto nor her supporters made it to the park where the rally was scheduled to take place?

THE SWARMS OF RIOT POLICE who spent the day blocking the tree-lined street in front of Bhutto's house looked ready to battle an entire army of anti-government rioters. Standing stiff and covered with ribbed hard-plastic shells over their arms and legs, they also looked like Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Looming around them were concrete barriers, numerous coils of razor wire, and an armored-personnel carrier parked in such a way to trap Bhutto in her house. School-bus-sized paddy wagons, large enough to hold hundreds of people, waited nearby. Some of the police carried assault rifles, some waved bamboo sticks, and a few clutched tear-gas guns. But all the preparations were a bit futile. The only people around were journalists, most of them foreign. And even Musharraf knew that scenes of police beating on journalists wouldn't help his damaged international image.

By early Friday morning, hordes of journalists had already descended on Bhutto's house, hoping to caravan along with the PPP leader to Rawalpindi, Islamabad's sister city. Instead, Bhutto woke up to find her house surrounded. Although the authorities apparently never served her a proper detention order, Bhutto was placed under virtual house arrest. A little before noon, Naheed Khan, Bhutto's confidante, told reporters that "the rally will definitely go on" and that Bhutto would break through the cordon; she even compared the siege of a few hundred policemen to Pakistan being occupied by the Indian army. Later, the Peoples Party's main spokeswoman said a million supporters had planned to attend the rally, but that several thousand were arrested in the past few days and tens of thousands of others were blocked from entering the city limits of Rawalpindi or Islamabad. (Pakistani government officials finally announced Bhutto's release from house arrest at the end of the day, far too late for her to attend the rally.) Faced with a lack of actual news to cover, bored hacks and cameramen waited outside of Bhutto's house.

The only high points of the day came when one of Bhutto's supporters or party workers tried to enter the vicinity. Typically, plainclothes police quickly snatched them up and stuffed them into the back of a paddy wagon. There weren't many arrested, perhaps two dozen all day. But in an area hardly the size of a football field, crowded with hundreds of news channels broadcasting around the world using portable satellite stations, the sight of a political prisoner being manhandled by Musharraf's goons generated a flies-on-raw-meat kind of reaction. (At one point, a friend of mine received a text message that Bhutto was preparing to sneak out the back door of her house and come down a back road. We called out to two other friends, and started running toward the back road. Literally 200 other journalists took off chasing us, sure that we knew something they didn't. This might have been the closest I'll ever get to running run with the

Riot police looking like Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles prevent Bhutto from leaving her house on November 9.

Barb wire surrounds Bhutto's house.

bulls in Pamplona.) With cameramen pushing and shoving (and, in one instance, punching) to get a closer angle, the prisoners took advantage of the attention to chant slogans ("Long Live Bhutto!" "Give these crumbling walls one more push!" "This regime cannot go on!") and flash victory signs. Despite the civil disobedience, there was no relaxation of gender codes; a detachment of policewomen was assigned to rough up the women political prisoners.

Bhutto finally made it out of her house in the late afternoon and gave a press conference, with concertina wire and a line of riot police separating her and the media. "This barbed wire stands in the way of democracy," she said in Urdu over a loudspeaker connected to a white Land Cruiser. When I couldn't make out one portion of her speech in Urdu, a police in riot gear kindly translated it for me. Then, playing to her audience, Bhutto switched to English and criticized Musharraf's weak approach to fighting the "War on Terror." She said, "Our army is not fighting extremists because they are too involved in crushing pro-democracy supporters." In the past few days, militants in the Swat valley of the North West Frontier Province have taken over several police stations, lowering the Pakistan flag and replacing it with their own.

An orange sun was setting through the trees while Bhutto announced her plans to lead a "long march" next week from the eastern city of Lahore, the capital of Punjab province, to Islamabad in the northwest. Could she draw a crowd in Punjab? Voters there are more divided, choosing between Nawaz Sharif's party, the pro-Musharraf party, and the Pakistan Peoples Party. Punjabis also tend to be better educated and more likely to read newspapers; they may be skeptical of Bhutto, who is only back in Pakistan because of a "deal" with Musharraf. Her revolutionary credentials, in other words, are in question.

A couple hours after Bhutto went back inside her home and the media frenzy dispersed, I asked Ahsan Iqbal, the information secretary of the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz Sharif's group), if Bhutto's house arrest and strong anti-Musharraf statements removed some of the skepticism the other opposition parties felt toward her. Iqbal admitted to still having some reservations and said there was some "ambiguity" in people's minds about whether Bhutto planned to sincerely ditch Musharraf or not. But so long as Musharraf continues acting like a brute, Iqbal added, Bhutto would eventually embrace the true opposition movement. "Musharraf has pushed himself into a quagmire," he said. "There is no way out." ❑

With no sign of Bhutto actually leaving her house, hundreds of journalists waited around, starved for news. When a local man drags his goat through the crowd, the cameramen pounce.

Current ICWA Fellows

Elena Agarkova • RUSSIA • May 2008 - 2010

Elena will be living in Siberia, studying management of natural resources and the relationship between Siberia's natural riches and its people. Previously, Elena was a Legal Fellow at the University of Washington's School of Law, at the Berman Environmental Law Clinic. She has clerked for Honorable Cynthia M. Rufe of the federal district court in Philadelphia, and has practiced commercial litigation at the New York office of Milbank, Tweed, Hadley & McCloy LLP. Elena was born in Moscow, Russia, and has volunteered for environmental non-profits in the Lake Baikal region of Siberia. She graduated from Georgetown University Law Center in 2001, and has received a bachelor's degree in political science from Barnard College.

Ezra Fieser • GUATEMALA • January 2008 - 2010

Ezra is interested in economic and political changes in Central America. He is an ICWA fellow living in Guatemala where he will write about the country's rapidly changing economic structure and the effects on its politics, culture and people. He was formerly the deputy city editor for *The* (Wilmington, Del.) *News Journal*, a staff writer for *Springfield* (Mass.) *Republican* and a Pulliam Fellow at *The Arizona Republic*. He is a graduate of Emerson College in Boston.

Suzy Hansen • TURKEY • April 2007 - 2009

A John O. Crane Memorial Fellow, Suzy will be writing about politics and religion in Turkey. A former editor at the *New York Observer,* her work has also appeared in *Salon*, the *New York Times Book Review*, the *Nation*, and other publications. She graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1999.

Derek Mitchell • INDIA • September 2007 - 2009

As a Phillips Talbot Fellow, Derek will explore the impact of global trade and economic growth on Indians living in poverty. He has served for the past year as a volunteer for Swaraj Peeth, an institute in New Delhi dedicated to nonviolent conflict resolution and Mahatma Gandhi's thought. Previously he was a Fulbright scholar in India at the Gandhi Peace Foundation. He has coordinated foreign policy research at George Washington University's Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies and worked as a political organizer in New Hampshire. Derek graduated with a degree in religion from Columbia University.

Nicholas Schmidle • PAKISTAN • February 2006 - 2008

Nick is a freelance writer interested in the intersection of culture, religion, and politics in Asia. He's in Pakistan as an ICWA fellow, examining issues of ethnic, sectarian, and national identity. Previously, he reported from Central Asia and Iran. His work has been published in the *Washington Post,* the *Weekly Standard, Foreign Policy, the Christian Science Monitor*, and elsewhere. He holds a master's degree in International Affairs from American University.

Raphael Soifer • BRAZIL • April 2007-2009

An actor, director, playwright, musician and theatre educator, Raphi Soifer is a Donors' Fellow studying, as a participant and observer, the relationship between the arts and social change in communities throughout Brazil. He has worked as a performer and director in the United States and Brazil, and has taught performance to prisoners and underprivileged youth through People's Palace Projects in Rio de Janeiro and Community Works in San Francisco. He holds a bachelor's degree in Theatre Studies and Anthropology from Yale University.

Institute Fellows are chosen on the basis of character, previous experience and promise. They are young professionals funded to spend a minimum of two years carrying out self-designed programs of study and writing outside the United States. The Fellows are required to report their findings and experiences from the field once a month. They can write on any subject, as formally or informally as they wish. The result is a unique form of reporting, analysis and periodic assessment of international events and issues.

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