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Fall of Queen Bibi: From the hope of a nation to money-launderer

by Burhan Wazir

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Beautiful, eloquent, passionate - Benazir Bhutto, once Pakistan's great political hope, has been convicted of money-laundering

MOHTARMA BENAZIR BHUTTO, or Bibi as she is affectionately known in Pakistan, has been feeling homesick for some time. Two weeks ago, at a party in Dubai to celebrate her 50th birthday, the exiled former Prime Minister chose to honour the occasion with a self-penned poem. The nine pages of closely typed print, written as a commemorative account of both past achievements and unfolding glories, make for enlightening reading.

Recalling Pakistan, a country now governed by General Pervez Musharraf, she writes:

*My spirit is in one place
My body in another
My mind torn asunder
The Elections were so Unfair
Made of Broken Promises
Billions spent in marketing
A dictatorship as a democracy.*

The words appear to indicate an arrogant conceit; as if Bhutto feels she was destined to lead her country for ever. Or perhaps, having been in exile now for four years, she simply has too much time on her hands. Later, however, she writes as if dreaming of a return:

*We will raise buildings
Where there are deserts
And stop the weeping of the women of the land.
Cry not.*

For Bhutto, a return to Pakistan must now seem more distant a prospect than ever. On Tuesday an investigating magistrate in Switzerland found Bhutto and her husband, Asif Ali Zardari, guilty of money-laundering. Judge Daniel Devaud gave each a six-month suspended jail sentence, fined them £30,000 apiece and ruled that they should return nearly £7 million to the Pakistani Government. In one further embarrassment, Devaud also ruled that Bhutto hand back a necklace worth £117,000 to Pakistan.

The ruling, despite the protests of her lawyer Farooq Naek that she will appeal, ends Bhutto's political career. Twice Prime Minister, she was twice sacked on charges of corruption before her Pakistan People's Party was soundly beaten in the 1997 elections. Her husband was jailed for taking kickbacks and Bhutto fled the country. Her last four years, spent mainly in London and Dubai, have been dogged by the same unrelenting allegations: that while in power during the Eighties and the Nineties she and her husband siphoned off millions of pounds from the country's coffers.

"Pakistan is an incredibly unpredictable country," says Teresita Shaffer, the director of South Asian programmes at the Centre for Strategic International Studies in Washington. "So I would not rule out a return to power for Bhutto. But the Swiss verdict carries a lot of credibility that will obviously reverberate back home. She was never strong enough to rule her country effectively. She did try to make changes for women by setting up education programmes. Even then, though, the budgets allocated to those were so small, they had a negligible effect."

It has been a long way to fall for the first woman prime minister in the Muslim world. She was once Pakistan's — and to a considerable degree South Asia's — greatest political hope. She carried all the right credentials from the outset. Bhutto studied at Harvard and Oxford, where as president of the Oxford Union she was a contemporary of Bill Clinton. Her father, the late Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was the most popular leader in Pakistan's volatile 55-year history — a natural politician with a near-mystical ability to electrify popular support. Overthrown by a military coup in 1977 led by General Zia ul-Haq, Zulfikar Bhutto was hanged in 1979. The young Benazir spent half an hour with him the day before his execution. She herself was jailed for five years and fled abroad on her release.

As her father's chosen successor, Bhutto re-emerged in exile as a natural and empowering political force. Campaigning for political reform and an end to the religiously oppressive rule of Haq, the young Bhutto was powerfully eloquent, passionate and, most importantly, untainted by the charges of corruption that are de rigueur in the tribal world of Pakistani politics. She returned to Pakistan a national heroine in 1986. Two years later Haq died in a plane crash. In elections the same year, Bhutto was overwhelmingly voted into office.

Her triumph was an audacious blow to the country's clerics, who traditionally wield power with backroom deals that sit firmly along old tribal alliances. In the West, Bhutto's victory was supposed to usher in a golden age of democracy to an otherwise despaired-of corner of the world. Her administration, however, was tainted by accusations of nepotism. She lost elections in 1990, returned to power by a slim margin in 1993 but was ousted again three years later.

Away from politics there were more personal tragedies for the family. In 1996 Pakistani security forces killed her brother, Murtaza Bhutto, after a gunfight outside his apartment in Karachi. He had been politically estranged from the family for some time, constantly accusing his sister's Government of corruption. Another of her brothers, Shanawaz, died in suspicious circumstances in Paris in 1985.

"To some extent, you could argue that there is a Bhutto family curse," says Teresita Shaffer. "In most cases there has been a historical rift between her family and the military. That has ensured that she has always struggled to rule when she has been in power. Although it could also be argued that at times she has been her own worst enemy."

LIKE any political exile Bhutto has not adjusted well to sitting on the sidelines. Her second period of exile, the last four years, has been particularly tough. Prevented from returning to Pakistan, she is now forced to snipe at the Government in newspaper columns and speeches. She has gone full circle. In her youth she waited patiently for one military ruler, Zia ul-Haq, to allow her back into the country. In adulthood she does the same, killing time until Musharraf exonerates her. It is unlikely to happen.

Last summer, on a particularly muggy afternoon, I made my way to Kensington. In a small fourth-floor apartment Bhutto sat sipping tea and chatting to political supporters and editors from the Asian press. She was returning to Pakistan that weekend, she announced excitedly. Later she told me: "I can't wait to go back home. The country is waiting for me." When I pointed out the likelihood of her arrest on arrival, she grew agitated. "Pakistan is my homeland. They can't stop me from going back to my homeland." Unsurprisingly, she has yet to return.

Bhutto is charming company; flirtatious, inquisitive and dogmatic. She outlined an agenda for political reform in Pakistan, argued for the closing down of the religious schools that led to the rise of the Taliban and lambasted the military leadership for welding itself on to the American-sponsored War on Terror.

She was also, however, unmistakably naive. "All the allegations against me are false," she said. "It is a witch-hunt, and no one believes it." I reminded her that for much of the Nineties her husband had been nicknamed Mr Ten Percent, reflecting the size of his alleged commissions on business deals he helped to put through. Towards the end of her time in Pakistan his title was upped to Mr Fifty Percent. "Those are just rumours," Bhutto told me. "It is a campaign to discredit me." She looked worried, though. In Pakistan the clamour against her was reaching overwhelming proportions.

The money trail behind her and her husband requires some explaining. In 2001 an anti-corruption inquiry revealed that her husband had used millions of pounds in illegal kickbacks to buy properties in Britain. The charges centred on a £5 million, nine-bedroom mansion called Rockwood in Brook, Surrey. William Pepper, an American lawyer advising prosecutors in Islamabad, said the money used to purchase Rockwood "rightfully belongs to the government of Pakistan".

Bhutto claimed she had never heard of the property bought by her husband, who had been an investment minister in her Government. "I have never seen the paperwork to prove it," she said. "I do not believe he had anything to do with it." More recently, however, she seems to have changed her mind. "Perhaps he did," she said in 2001. A touch defensively, she added: "He never interfered in my work and I never interfered in his."

The denials, however, carry less clout than they once did. Bhutto has taken to defending her behaviour by citing the macho, incestuous world of Pakistani politics. As a woman in an Islamic country, she says, she has been forced to play the same dirty games as everyone else. Nevertheless the allegations that currently trouble Bhutto have irreparably tarnished the golden image of a youthful idealist who was once poised to democratise her post-colonial country for ever.

"This is the latest tragedy in a long line of Bhutto tragedies," says Stephen Cohen, a senior fellow at the Washington-based Brookings Institution who specialises in South Asian politics. "Bhutto was expected to live up to her father's reputation. But she had neither the training nor the temperament. And her arrival in Pakistan also upset military leaders who continue to hold grievances against her family. I think, in many ways, she is a uniquely gifted individual who has a brilliant intelligence. Unfortunately, that doesn't extend to being a suitable leader for her country."

As she contemplates the ramifications of the sentence given out by Judge Daniel Devaud, Bhutto will undoubtedly be drawn to the ironies of the poem she penned so recently to celebrate her 50th birthday. Bhutto's critics will seize on two lines:

*I think of the poor people
A better fate they deserve.*

Pakistanis would be hard pressed to come up with a more damning political eulogy.

Rise And Fall Of Benazir Bhutto

Benazir Bhutto

Age: 50.

Born in Sindh, Pakistan in 1953.

Educated: Harvard and Oxford, where she was President of the Union.

Father: former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto; executed after a military coup led by General Zia ul-Haq in 1978. Benazir Bhutto was imprisoned before her father's death and spent most of her five-year jail term in solitary confinement.

Political career: Prime Minister of Pakistan from 1988 to 1990, and from 1993 to 1996. Dismissed from office both times for alleged corruption.

Husband: industrialist and business tycoon Asif Zardari, currently in jail in Pakistan.

The curse of the Bhutto clan: Her brother Murtaza, a fierce political rival, was shot dead in Karachi, Pakistan, in 1996. Another brother, Shahnawaz, was found dead in his Paris apartment in 1985.

In exile: Bhutto, unable to return to Pakistan where she faces certain arrest, spends her time between Dubai and London. Her Pakistan People's Party displayed a strong showing in last year's election.

Political turmoil: 1999 — convicted for not appearing in court.
2002 — barred from standing in general elections in Pakistan.
2003 — found guilty of money-laundering by a Swiss judge.

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 **Burhan Wazir**

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