

Pakistan under a cloud

If you're bored watching George Bush and Saddam Hussein trade puffs of hot air, have a look at always exciting Pakistan where, on Saturday, recently deposed prime minister, Benazir Bhutto is due to face a legal inquiry that may bar her from running in national elections.

Bhutto, who was kicked out of office by President Ishaq Khan under a controversial provision of Pakistan's Constitution, has been charged with massive corruption, nepotism and personal speculation in a series of cotton and land deals. If found guilty, she will be banned from leading her People's Party in upcoming October elections.

Without the charismatic Benazir, her party will likely face a sound defeat. Unless, of course, she somehow turns the tables on her enemies in the new government, army and intelligence service and emerges as a poor, helpless girl abused by horrid men — an act she has performed with style in the past.

To Benazir's supporters, she is a Pakistani Joan of Arc; to her enemies, Joan Collins in a sari.

Meanwhile, Benazir has been accusing Pakistan's powerful Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) agency of fomenting a coup against her — even though its director, whom I recently interviewed in Islamabad — was her own appointee and an old Bhutto family friend. A new director general has been named whose allegiance is with the army and supporters of the late president, Zia ul-Haq.

Not to be outdone, anti-Benazir forces are accusing her of having secretly asked for Indian military aid to keep her in power. ISI reportedly wiretapped her secret talks with then Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in which she spoke ill of her own army. And in a May meeting with 54 senior generals, one of her top cabinet members was accused of being an agent of India's powerful intelligence service, the RAW.

A chief aide of Benazir, retired Gen. Babar, fired back, accusing the new government's chief minister of Sindh province and federal cabinet minister Ghulam Khar, of being spies for RAW.

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All these charges and counter-charges are sensational stuff — especially if any are true, which they probably aren't.

What is true is that off in Delhi, RAW spymasters must be tickled pink. They lately have come under fire from Parliament for ineptitude, unaccountability and rogue operations in Sri Lanka and Assam. RAW can now point to the wild mud-slinging in Pakistan as proof it's earning its daily rupees.

Another noteworthy point in this interesting fracas: The Bhuttos, father Zulfikar, wife Nusrat and daughter Benazir, always portrayed themselves as populist defenders of the poor against the rapacious rich and the nefarious army, notably its former leader, Zia ul-Haq. In reality, the Bhuttos are probably Pakistan's richest feudal landowners. Second richest are the Zadaris, whose scion, Asif, became Benazir's husband.

Both husband and his father, Hakim, are now up to their wealthy ears in charges of embezzlement, fraud, speculation and outright thievery. Even in a country as notoriously corrupt as Pakistan, the Bhuttos and Zadaris stand out for egregious malfeasance. And, perhaps even more shockingly, for their utter nonchalance in doing so.

I saw Benazir's mother pull up to my hotel in a huge Rolls, complete with flags, outriders and fawning courtiers — ranee, or queen, in all but name. She seemed unconcerned that a few miles away her people were starving or living in horrible squalor.

It reminded me of the shah of Iran and his even more loathsome sister, Princess Ashraf.

But such contempt for suffering humanity is not exclusive to the Bhuttos. Most of Pakistan's politicians are too busy looting, pillaging and intriguing to care about the nation's terribly poor. Things are no better — and maybe even worse, in neighboring India.

In this nasty business, there is one curious and, for me, sad note. It's traditional for politicians and bureaucrats in Asia to stuff their pockets and enrich their families and cronies. But the family of Pakistan's late president Zia, who was assassinated in a still-unsolved 1988 air crash, has no money, no Rolls, no palaces. That is because Zia was the only honest leader Pakistan has had in many years. He was put into power by the army precisely because of his integrity.

Many of his supporters and officials did make money through graft, but Zia remains a paragon of decency and Islamic morality in a world grown cynical.

I have two messages to President Ishaq Khan. First, don't demean Pakistan by nitpicking Benazir to death with petty charges. Either throw the book at her or let her alone. Second, reopen the investigation of Zia's murder. Until the truth comes out, a black and ghostly cloud will hang over Pakistan, cursing the nation and its leaders.

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