

The politics of chaos

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan — When the glamorous 35-year-old Benazir Bhutto took over as Pakistan's prime minister in December 1988, she became an instant media celebrity. Not only was Bhutto the first female leader of a Muslim nation, she also promised to restore democracy to Pakistan after years of military rule and to bring prosperity to its 110 million people.

After two turbulent years in office she still commands widespread popular veneration here and respect abroad. In person, she seemed to me even more beautiful than in her photos and looks very much the movie star which she easily could have been had she not followed her late father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, into politics.

There is no doubt that Benazir Bhutto and her redoubtable mother, the regal Nusrat Begum, are still the central force in the wild melee that passes here for democratic politics. But it's increasingly evident that the Bhuttos and their Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) are in deep and growing trouble.

The PPP has not been able to secure a working majority in parliament and has been hamstrung at every turn by the opposition coalition, which includes many supporters of the late president, Zia ul-Haq, who, along with other senior government leaders, was assassinated in a mysterious 1988 air crash.

Shortly after Zia's death, Bhutto had to make a deal with the main power in Pakistan, the army. The generals would run all military, security and

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intelligence policy. Zia's experienced foreign minister, Yaqub Khan, would stay on and manage foreign policy. I interviewed Yaqub Khan at length and found him dazzlingly brilliant, a sort of modern-day Tallyrand — wily, charming, visionary and bursting with intellectual force. Afghan policy was left to ISI, the powerful intelligence agency.

Cynics here say that the army allowed Bhutto to run the rest of the government in order to maintain a facade of democracy to please the U.S. Congress which allocates \$500 million annually in vitally needed aid to Pakistan. An army takeover would have caused U.S. aid to cease.

Now, however, it's questionable whether the Bhuttos can hold on to their limited political power at a time when Pakistan is facing two severe crises. First, India is threatening war over Kashmir. Second, the war in Afghanistan is taxing Pakistan to its limit. There are 3.5 million Afghan refugees here, straining the economy and civil order. The Afghan war has produced a grave upsurge of drug dealing and addiction across Pakistan.

At the same time, Pakistan's southern province Sindh, the centre of Bhutto power, is verging on civil war between native Sindhis and Urdu-speaking Muslim refugees from India. Bhutto has so far been powerless to deal with the growing crisis in Sindh, provoking threats from the generals that they may have to impose martial law. Which, of course, means an army seizure of power.

From afar, Pakistan looks and sounds like a democracy. But up close the view is sadly different. A real democratic system has never taken roots here. A small number of immensely rich feudal landowning families, among them the Bhuttos and their in-laws, dominate politics by their money and secure votes from the poor by making extravagant and totally unrealistic promises of social welfare and jobs.

Compromise and power-sharing, the essence of western democracy, are unknown. Politics in Pakistan resembles tribal warfare on a massive scale. Each side loots as much as it can, stacking the government with its backers and relatives, and makes or breaks alliances with dizzying speed. Call it the political version of snatch and grab.

Not surprisingly, the system is not working and the PPP, including the Bhutto family, are being charged with egregious corruption and abuses of power. The opposition would no doubt face similar charges were it in office. Many Pakistanis still mourn the iron-fisted but uncorruptible Zia ul-Haq.

And finally, the question of who assassinated Zia. The entire matter has been covered up or suppressed. Honest, democratic government demands a full investigation and the truth — no matter how unpleasant.

Punch



"Remember, Winslow, it's not how you play the game. It's if you win that counts!"