

No Smooth Sailing for Benazir

People who served under Benazir during her two tenures as Prime Minister say that she had zero ability as an administrator and was known to be helplessly surrounded by self-seeking politicians who had thrown all decency to the winds in their zeal to make money, writes *Anwar Hashmi*

For Benazir, the homecoming must have started as a fairytale but ended as a nightmare. There are countless theories doing the rounds in Pakistan as to who sought to eliminate her the night that claimed 140 lives. Some are even saying that Benazir did it to divert people's attention away from her sagging image of an opportunist politician who had struck a deal with a dictator.

The attack has served its purpose, if it was intended to create a mega-stir and bring political fault lines into sharper focus. The spat between Shujaat Hussain and Benazir has shown the irreconcilability of their positions though both are being propped up by Musharraf as faces of a liberal Pakistan. The tentative move to have an alliance between the ruling PML-Q (Pakistan Muslim League, Qureishi) and PML-Nawaz shows on the other hand that Benazir's presence in Pakistan may act as an adhesive for these two PML sisters in the

long run. They may even seek an alliance with the MMA (Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal). Alternately, Benazir may seek an understanding with MQM (Muttahida Qaumi Movement). Musharraf has an unenviable option of choosing between these options.

Bhutto may be able to retain her hold over much of rural Sindh, as was visible in the one-million-plus crowd thronging the streets of Karachi upon her return. But her hold on urban Sindh has always been doubtful. In that case she has to strike some electoral understanding with MQM, to consolidate her position in Sindh. However, at the moment it is not clear if MQM will bite the bait.

She does not command as much popularity in Punjab. In terms of political clout, with 148 out of 272 general seats in the National Assembly, Punjab plays a much bigger role in the elections. If recent Gallup polls are an indicator, Nawaz Sharif's support base has increased considerably after his aborted bid to return to Pakistan. If the judiciary comes out with a verdict favouring his return before



the elections, the electoral calculus may change further. In all likelihood, the performance of the PPP (Pakistan People's Party) is not going to be any better than its performance in 2002 in Punjab, if PML-Q and PML-N make truce.

Benazir has willingly assumed the label of being a liberal, pro-US politician. She has needlessly antagonized the religious political elite in the entire country by exaggerating her revulsion towards anything related to MMA, equating it with the radical Islamic forces. She cited as a reason for not joining Nawaz Sharif's multi-party meet in London earlier this year that MMA was invited to join it.

That has turned her into an attractive target for the fundamentalist radical forces. Given the anti-American feeling in the Pashtun belt stretching from NWFP (North West Frontier Province) till northern Balochistan, it is almost certain that her electoral performance in these two provinces will be even poorer than in 2002.

Many analysts have interpreted Benazir's deal with Musharraf as a 'kiss of death'. This may prove correct because her overall political image has suffered a lot in the process. The Benazir-specific National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO) that provided her indemnity from all the cases filed against her is being interpreted by all and sundry

as a brazen and opportunistic move.

Moreover, the judiciary sitting in judgement over NRO may well turn it down, complicating matters further for her. With all the cases restored against her, she may not even be eligible to contest the elections. There are also other nagging issues like removal of restrictions on a third term as Prime Minister. With Shujaat Hussain and Sheikh Rashid in full cry against her the PML-Q-dominated National Assembly is not likely to remove this restriction before the elections.

Musharraf is also playing a very cautious game. Some say that he may actively support Benazir under American pressure and seek to manipulate the elections in her favour. He understands well that by warming up to Benazir he has alienated the top leadership in PML-Q, his own creation. After all, he is grateful to PML-Q for at least electing him for a second term. That is why he is not expected to identify himself too much with Benazir in the coming days. He is more likely to appear to be playing the role of an impartial umpire in the coming electoral game.

Writing in September this year, an American analyst had cautioned policymakers in Washington that Pakistan would be better able to pursue the policies that really matter to the US, if its leaders were free of the taint of being 'Washington's creatures'. For all practical

purposes, Benazir more than Musharraf is being perceived as a stooge of the US in Pakistan. That will also reduce her political prospects considerably.

Thus, in spite of the backing of the U.S. and the goodwill of General Musharraf, Benazir will have to pass through very trying times ahead. By parroting the mantras of human rights, democracy and liberalism she may have enthralled audiences abroad, but back home there are few takers for her claim to fight terror tooth and nail. Many observers in Pakistan believe that her political agenda is a total sellout to the U.S. She has to shed her penchant for globe-trotting and address herself to the domestic audience.

Even many of her sympathizers in Pakistan believe that her husband's unpopular shadow will continue to loom large over her political prospects. People who served under her during her two tenures as Prime Minister admit that she had popular appeal but zero ability as an administrator. She was known to be helplessly surrounded by self-seeking politicians who had thrown all decency to the winds in their zeal to make money. She has to keep all this in mind and do a lot of groundwork to endear herself to the people she intends to serve. She is short on time. She has to start right away.

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