

‘Smooth Transition to Democracy’?



As she prepares to return to public life in Pakistan after nine years in exile, in an exclusive interview with **Shyam Bhatia** of *Asian Affairs* former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto reveals that she still has misgivings about any future polls. But she also predicts that if the elections are 'stolen', the people of Pakistan will launch their own version of an Orange Revolution.

AA: What has suddenly made you trust General Musharraf? After all, he still holds all the cards and the amnesty offered to you could still be thrown out by the National Assembly or the Supreme Court.

BB: We need to have a smooth transition to democracy through free and fair elections. We need a government in place that has the mandate of the people. Towards this end the steps taken include, first, a promise by General Musharraf to the Supreme Court of Pakistan to retire as Army Chief; second, the establishment of a parliamentary ethics committee; third, recognition of the role of opposition in a political system; fourth, steps towards a transparent vote

count; and fifth, acknowledgement and termination of political vendetta. Of course, there is much more to be done in terms of holding fair elections, but this is a start.

The courts did not strike down the executive action to release those sentenced for acts of corruption, including members of the MMA [Muttahida Majlis-e-Amaal], MQM [Muttahida Qaumi Movement] and Mr Nawaz Sharif. Therefore, it is unlikely that the court will strike down a legislative action against innocent persons who faced a decade-long witchhunt at massive

cost to the public funds.

AA: Could you share with us some of your impressions about General Musharraf? How does he address you and talk to you? How do you address him and talk to him?

BB: I know you are curious but you will have to wait for another time.

AA: Is it true that when you met him in Abu Dhabi recently, he was so overwrought that you had to suggest a recess, following which you got down to the hard bargaining and nitty-gritty of a deal?

BB: I am surprised at the wild speculation.

AA: You have hitherto argued that any election would be rigged. So what has suddenly changed?

BB: We still have grave misgivings and doubts about the fairness of the forthcoming polls. These remain part of our ongoing negotiations.

There were serious discrepancies in the

electoral rolls and other technical issues relating to the holding of elections. The PPP has called for a non-partisan caretaker government, restrictions on the powers of Mayors during the electoral process, ban on the use of state resources for election campaigning, and end of interference of intelligence agencies in trying to influence the course of elections.

AA: You presume that your party will win the elections. Does this mean the elections will be rigged in your favour?

BB: The PPP rejects rigged elections. We are optimistic of winning because Pakistan's electoral history suggests that the PPP has won the largest number of seats in every fair election. Opinion polls have us leading in every poll over the last one year.

In the 2002 elections while I was in exile and the regime did massive rigging, the PPP won the largest number of popular votes and emerged as the second-largest party in terms of parliamentary seats.

If we succeed in ensuring free and fair elections the PPP is bound to win. We have the popular support, we have the organisation, the programme, and the candidates.

AA: If you do become prime minister, will it be like 1988? In other words, will defence and foreign policy remain out of your control, leaving you free to deal with only internal policies?

BB: I hope that people give the PPP a big mandate so we can govern effectively. We have been discussing a realistic political system with the other political parties and with the present regime. We want to move the country forward away from the dysfunctional democracy of the 1990s. For that we need a balance of power between the Presidency and Parliament.

AA: Do you think we are witnessing a replay of 1988, in the sense that Ghulam Ishaq Khan has been replaced by General Musharraf and General Aslam Beg by General Kiani?

BB: The two situations are fundamentally different. In 1988 Zia died in an air crash and the Senate Chairman, a civilian, took over as President, as envisaged in the Constitution. In 2007 a uniformed



President is seeking to transform himself into a civilian president and the political parties are seeking to address the issue of balance of power between the President and Parliament.

AA: From the outside it seems the U.S. has played a huge role in fixing this deal. Given this American role, where does it leave Pakistan's sovereignty and independence?

BB: The PPP and other political parties were critical of Washington in the past for warmly embracing military dictatorship. We welcome Washington's initiative to back the people's desire for fair elections and representative government. Democracy is important for the empowerment of the people and for promoting a moderate, tolerant society.

AA: What can the U.S. do if Musharraf reneges on the deal? What guarantees can the U.S. offer?

BB: The people of Pakistan are excited at the prospect of the restoration of democracy. They expect fair elections. If the elections are stolen, the people would react just as the people of Ukraine did. We could have our own Orange Revolution.

AA: If you become PM, how will you tackle the problem of the Taliban roaming free in the FATA [Federally Administered Tribal Areas] districts of Pakistan?

BB: We would not rely solely on the use of force in dealing with extremism

in the tribal areas, as the military regime has been doing.

The PPP would also take political steps and improve the socio-economic conditions of the people in the tribal area. Poverty and social isolation provide an ideal breeding ground for militancy. The PPP plans to empower and emancipate the people of the tribal areas from exploitation and unemployment.

In fact, we have started work on it from the opposition. Last month the PPP filed a constitutional petition in the Supreme Court seeking extension of the Political Parties Act to the tribal areas. We want to bring the people of the tribal areas into the twenty-first century and make them stakeholders in fighting militancy and extremism.

The PPP would interrupt the flow of drug funds that finance militancy on the one hand and spread education and employment on the other as key non-military measures to deal with extremism in the tribal areas.

AA: Your internal power base is in Sindh. How will you tackle the MQM in Sindh?

BB: The PPP is a federal party and its power base is the people of all federating units of Pakistan. The MQM has a support base in urban Sindh. We acknowledge that.

AA: When it comes to the peace process with India that has been underway since 2004, what thoughts do you have about pushing it forward?

BB: The military establishment has finally taken a leaf from the PPP policy and manifesto for peace and security in South Asia. When we proposed confidence-building measures between India and Pakistan we were dubbed as a security risk. Now all the opponents of our policy agree on the need for peaceful relations with India despite our differences over Kashmir.

Learning from Europe following World War II, we will build democracies and common markets from the mountain peaks of Afghanistan to the Bay of Bengal. We will open up markets, we will open up roads and we will open up endless opportunities for the people of South Asia for a more prosperous future that brings peace, security, and human dignity. ■