



Perspectives

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Lydia Quarles, J.D., Senior Policy Analyst
John C. Stennis Institute of Government

Issue II: WOMEN WE'VE LOST IN 2007

Benazir Bhutto

Benazir Bhutto is another woman who helped define women and politics in my lifetime. I identified with her – as did many American women of a certain age – because while a Pakistani woman, she was educated at Harvard and Oxford, so she **sounded** like me. (Well, maybe she **sounded** more like the Kennedy women.) At Oxford, she was elected to the Oxford Union, perhaps the world's most prestigious collegiate debating society. (I debated for “the W”.) We were proximate in age; however, by the time she was 35, she was Prime Minister of Pakistan. That's amazing.

Sadly, she was dead at 54. Benazir Bhutto died on December 27, 2007 in Rawalpindi. Reports coming out of Pakistan about the specifics of her death are mixed, but it is fair to say that she died a violent death amidst her country's social and political upheaval. It is also fair to say that this tragedy could have been foretold. Perhaps it was even written in the stars.

Benazir Bhutto was the oldest child of a Pakistani political dynasty. Her father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, served as Prime Minister of Pakistan in the 1970s, founding the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), and rising to power with a populist, pro-democracy message. Refusing to let his government be run by the army, he found himself imprisoned by General Zia ul-Haq in 1977, charged with conspiracy to murder, and executed in 1979. Two days before her father's death, Benazir visited him in prison, giving him her word that she would carry on his work, which she did.

Murtaza Bhutto, the oldest son of the family, fled Pakistan after his father's fall from power. He lived in foreign capitols for almost 20 years and was elected a provincial legislator while in exile in 1993. Returning home to hold office, he was shot dead under mysterious circumstances in 1996 at age 42. He had become Benazir's political rival, with the backing of their mother, Nusrat. Shannawaz, the youngest child, was found dead under mysterious circumstances in his apartment in southern France in 1985. He was 27. Shannawaz had just returned from a family reunion, and reports suggested that he may have been poisoned. Benazir's nieces hold Benazir responsible. A younger sister, Sunam, survives, as does Nusrat Bhutto.

For all of Benazir Bhutto's successes, she experienced plenty of failures: corruption charges involving allegations that she and her husband, Asif Zardari, stole millions of dollars from state coffers (allegations they both denied); and allegations of authorizing extrajudicial murders for her own political benefit (also denied). Similar allegations have been made against most political leaders in modern Pakistan, usually by competing political leaders. Partly in response to these allegations, Benazir Bhutto went into self-imposed exile in 1997 in London and Dubai.

That all too short and tragic family history sets the stage to view Benazir Bhutto, who served as prime minister of Pakistan from 1988-90 and 1993-1996, returned from her self-imposed exile

in October 2007 to run again for prime minister. Being no Pakistani scholar, I can only give you my view of Benazir Bhutto from my seat in this vast international arena. Benazir Bhutto served as a democratically elected prime minister in an Islamic—and some would argue Third World country in the 20th Century. That in itself is remarkable. Regardless of lineage, a woman could not have achieved as Benazir Bhutto did without raw talent, raw intellect and/or raw courage.

She was popular with the Pakistani people because she talked about democracy and social welfare issues—the bread and butter of a better life. She was popular with women because she advocated services for women and opposed sexual discrimination. She was popular with Americans because she seemed like us, advocating anti-terrorism before it was vogue to do so.

Founded in 1947, Pakistan is 6 years older than Bhutto. A young country founded upon the legacy of the democratic institutions of India's lengthy colonial status, it was born of the democratic process. Significantly, it was founded as an Islamic institution, promoting the idea that India's Muslims had the right to separate statehood. Trouble surfaced early on when its first Governor-General, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, unilaterally dismissed the Congress of the North West Frontier Province, substituting a Chief Minister in its place. While the British hoped that this was just Pakistan in the throes of the "terrible twos" of nationhood, Jinnah, unfortunately, set a precedent for governing in Pakistan. Historically, Pakistani leaders seem to spend most of their time dismissing large chunks of civilian government and accusing their opponents of graft and corruption. Call in the Taliban and its bandit predecessors from the northwest, and you have a potent elixir to diminish and destabilize secular democracy in Pakistan. Cheers!

Perhaps Benazir Bhutto's death was written in the stars. Like the death of democracy in Pakistan, we – and she – saw it coming. She denied that her life was like a Greek tragedy to a Times reporter in the 1990s, but she knew it was true. "Well, I hope (my life is) not so tragic," she said. Yet the evening before her death in an interview with Gail Sheely, she admitted that she was the enemy of the military regime and the terrorists operating in Pakistan. Benazir Bhutto realized that her father's PPP had survived draconian dictatorships, and that the people of Pakistan still savored the taste of democracy.

I believe she died trying to bring it to them. I think that the world would be better off with a pluralistic, secular, and democratic Pakistan. I know the world is not better off without Benazir Bhutto.

Benazir Bhutto wrote an autobiography, *Daughter of Destiny*, which was published by Simon & Schuster in 1989.

