

My Country of Horror and Possibility



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by Fatima Bhutto | August 14, 2009

"There are so many odds against us that we almost shouldn't be. But somehow we are."

Widely speculated to be a future heir to the Bhutto political dynasty, **Fatima Bhutto**, 27-year-old niece of the late Benazir Bhutto, has captured public imagination across Pakistan. A poet and writer, she openly denounces birthright politics and uses her pen to advocate for a truly democratic nation.

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As the Taliban advances across northern Pakistan, international headlines have declared my country the latest victim of an increasingly hostile fundamentalist regime. Yet those of us who have been living within Pakistan have been watching this unfold every day and know that this is nothing new: The Pakistani Taliban and their brand of extremism has been advancing throughout our country for the last ten years, and they are gaining traction among Pakistan's people largely because of our own government's corruption and neglect.

My generation of Pakistanis has come of age under this military and civilian dictatorship, under a government that aids and abets these fundamentalist groups while vastly ignoring the needs of the people. The international community must understand that our government's corruption—and the United States' support of this corruption—has not only created enormous poverty but has also created a vacuum that Islamist fundamentalists are filling. This is the heart of the reason

why the Taliban has been successful in my country; it is not because we are a country of extremists, or a country of dishonesty.

I would like the world to know that when we say our government does not represent us, we mean it. Pakistanis are not our government; we did not vote for Asif Ali Zardari, our president. We do not vote for our governments, and when we do have elections, they are orchestrated and rigged.

When I travel abroad, there is a perception that because I am Pakistani I must have a beard or be engaged in some kind of jihad. No one factors in that we are a country that has Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, and Jain heritage. We are a country of people who speak a Hindi-ized Urdu and a Persian-ized Dari. We have so many shades that are not seen by the world because it is more convenient to portray us in a certain way that ignores our history, our realities, and our visions for the future of our country.

As a child growing up in exile from General Zia-ul-Haq's regime, I understood Pakistan much like the rest of the world understands us now: as a nightmarish place where women are stoned, where public floggings are encouraged, and where the dark shadow of dictatorship looms with a violent and orthodox edge.

For me, it was my father who gave Pakistan its soul. Before he was assassinated by police when I was 14, he would tell me of the various poets and Sufi saints enshrined in Sindh Province; of the orange, pink, and purple painted buses at every traffic light; of the smell of the Indian Ocean, of the taste of Pakcola. It became a sort of romantic place for me, when in reality it was an extremely violent and unpredictable country. When I moved to Pakistan, I came to know early on that beneath this violence is a soul, a heart.

When I moved permanently to Pakistan at age 11, I learned that this heart beats in Karachi. Our pulse is here. It is Pakistan's largest, most populous city and it is a cross between a refugee camp and a construction site. It is a broken-down city, but there is always something new happening here: a new art exhibit, new graffiti on the walls, new people coming to see what is swirling through our air, what radical new idea is emerging.

But when there is violence, Karachi is also the center. This is a city of immense poverty, and the violence we see is not always physical, though we see our fair share of that too. It is the violence of poverty. Karachi has one of the largest slum populations in the world. We are a very sad city, but because of that we are also a resilient city. There are so many odds against us that we almost shouldn't be. But somehow we are. That we continue to exist is hopeful for me, that we continue to be a business, artistic, and cultural center in the face of impossible violence is something to recognize and embrace. . . .



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But we also must embrace the fact that something is not working, and that something must give for Pakistan and her people to thrive. We are a country that is losing our people day by day to the Taliban because the government has turned their heads from our basic needs, and fundamentalist groups have stepped in to fill the widening gap.

We are a nuclear country that hasn't been able to eradicate polio per our Millennium Development Goals because we do not have enough electricity to refrigerate the vaccine. And we are a country where parents must choose between sending their children to a school with government teachers who collect salaries but do not teach, or sending them to the madrassa on the next block that teaches radical Islam but provides at least a basic education.

We were all hopeful when Barack Obama was elected the president of the United States. We thought there might be a chance for real change, but the fact is that he has merely continued Bush-era policies that fuel the violence.

We have seen Obama continue the drone missile attacks on northern Pakistan, ordering the first strike on North and South Waziristan during his very first week in office.

I have watched in absolute horror as Obama recently released \$1.5 billion in nonmilitary aid to our government. By my last count, Pakistan has received \$12 billion in aid from the US since 2002. And it has not helped in the least to make Pakistan, or our neighbors, safer.

By propping up our corrupt government and funding a president who has stolen an estimated \$2-3 billion from Pakistan's people, Obama is not helping to eradicate the "main threat to regional stability"—he's feeding it. When the Taliban gained control of Afghanistan in 1996, I never imagined that the footage I saw on the news—Afghan women being flogged, beaten, and raped as punishment for crimes that weren't really crimes at all—would play out in Pakistan's own

streets 13 years later. But now I see it happening to us. Up until recently I felt safe as a woman in my country, but today the situation for Pakistani women is rapidly deteriorating.

This rarely makes international headlines. The Western world seems to identify Pakistan with the fact that we were the first Muslim country to “elect” a woman leader—my aunt, Benazir Bhutto, who was prime minister from 1988 to 1990, and then again from 1993 to 1996, before she was assassinated in 2007. But my aunt did nothing to stop the deterioration of women’s rights in Pakistan. She—just like our current government—capitulated to radical Islam and refused to amend the Shariya Laws that infringe on women’s rights.

The Hudood Laws—put into place in 1979, during the time when my family and I were in exile, then taken out of practice in 2006 by former president Musharraf—are the enactment of Shariya Law and are again gaining traction in Pakistan. As a woman, if your head is not covered in public, you stand out. If you visit a household in a rural or small town, you will be taken to a room away from the men. And, if you commit adultery, your sentence will be death.

We have enormous challenges ahead of us as a country, but I do not believe that we are a lost cause, or that we will succumb to Talibanization just yet. We are a country that has an enormous amount of strength and determination; we are a country of the possible. This strength comes largely from ordinary women doing extraordinary things.

This is a country where women have to push for what they want; they have to push for what they need. And if you push—if you’re loud enough— you make ripples; you make waves. We have women in the arts; women in the NGO sector; women in leadership, but we do not afford women a voice in our media, in our politics, in our communities. It is women like Mukhtar Mai and her rolling courage who are the backbone of Pakistan. These women— and there are many of them who are operating under the radar—are standing up against the Hudood Laws and risking their lives for justice despite the challenges and increasing oppressions.

We are at a crucial point in Pakistan’s history; we have an opportunity to keep Pakistan from going the way of Afghanistan. It starts with showing solidarity and sharing our stories with other women. There is a phenomenal untapped sisterhood of women around the world, and if we tap that support and connect person to person, it will mean much more to Pakistan’s women than Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton giving our corrupt leaders billions of dollars.

When we talk about Pakistan, we must look to what becomes possible if we put money into the hands of grassroots organizations and people’s initiatives. We must turn our efforts to summer camps for girls, media training, teaching handicrafts to women who have been jailed for breaking the Hudood Laws. We must organize to get women ID cards across the country so that they can vote in our elections. All of this is possible; it just requires support. We cannot continue to put our fate in the hands of our government or in the hands of the US government. We cannot continue to ignore the potential of Pakistan’s people and, especially, Pakistan’s women.

We are a young country that emerged out of a heady idealism some 60 years ago, and we cannot let go of this sense of optimism. Milan Kundera said that “the struggle of people against power is

the struggle of memory against forgetting.” I, for one, will not forget the heart and soul of Pakistan that I came to know as a child in exile. I will keep fighting. ●