

Pilgrimage to nowhere

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A year on from Benazir Bhutto's assassination, Fatima Bhutto visits the family mausoleum and reflects on the poisonous legacy of her late aunt, a woman "without principles"



“A Disney version of the Taj Mahal”: devotees of Benazir arrive at the remodelled Bhutto family mausoleum in Garhi Khuda Bux, Sind Province

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The old Bhutto *mazaar*, or graveyard, is in a small town called Garhi Khuda Bux. It is not fair to call it a town; it's a hamlet really, nestled between swaths of fertile agricultural land and small town centres that cater to travelling traders and produce distributors. When I was younger, I used to know we were close to the *mazaar* as we drove by the old *paan wallah*. He was a geriatric who sold betel-leaf paans, conical beedi cigarettes and a pack or two of Gold Leaf extra-strong smokes from the table he sat on. The *mazaar* itself was hundreds of years old and is where the Bhuttos have been buried since they settled in Sind. Wooden pillars, carved with lattice designs, marked the absence of the four walls that would have enclosed the open-air burial site. It was a sombre resting place: four corners of Sind lay open around you, and the dusty smell of the air in Garhi Khuda Bux's desert climate surrounded mourners who came to mark death anniversaries and birthdays.

It's all gone now.

It was torn down by the last member of the family to be buried there, Benazir Bhutto, and rebuilt as a mausoleum. In a country where politics has always orbited around personalities, she was determined that hers would be the largest and the grandest. Benazir rebuilt the old family *mazaar* in the manner of an Aladdin-style castle. The structure has a domed roof, four minaret-like points facing in different directions, a grand driveway so that no one need bother to walk, and elaborate staircases which lead nowhere. It's revolting. It looks like the Disney version of the Taj Mahal.

A visiting journalist once asked me what was going to be built on a second storey of the grandiose mausoleum, the one the staircases presumably were erected for. "A gift store, probably," I answered. I was joking. But there is one now - actually, there are plenty, they're just not on the second floor.

Outside the mausoleum there are juice sellers, men with portable pakora and popcorn machines, stalls selling pictures of all the dead Bhuttos and more stalls selling posters and tapes of the dead Bhuttos' speeches. It's macabre, but this is the shrine that Benazir built for herself; this is the afterbirth of her death.

Now her posters, in the manner of those at Sufi shrines, hang inside the mausoleum, over the graves even. There is no space for the sacred, there is no space for grief, only space for advertising and political grandstanding of "Look whom I'm related to"-type posters, "Vote for my children, they're next!" warnings, and so on.

One year after Benazir's assassination, this is what her legacy has come down to. And it is fitting that in her death, like in her life, there is no talk of principles or ideology, only of personality and genealogy.

There is, however, a small matter to contend with: the larger legacy, so to speak. Two months after her violent death, the party she headed as chairperson for life (an actual title) - the Pakistan Peoples Party - came to power on a sympathy vote. The people voted for a ghost and they ended up with her husband, Asif Ali Zardari, and her cronies in power. Pakistan is, to date, the only nuclear-armed country in the world led by two former criminals. And as the new PPP's first year in power comes to a close, coinciding with the death of its chairperson, I feel compelled, as a Pakistani, to recap what all this means and to ask, "What legacy have we been left with?"

“Legacies are insulting in the face of mass suicides, carried out by members of the poorer classes because they simply can no longer afford to live”

Clearly, it is a legacy with no sense of irony. In the United States the Pakistani diplomatic mission to Texas is hard at work raising funds for a Charlie Wilson Chair of Pakistan Studies at the University of Texas, Austin. Out of all the people in the universe who should have a chair in Pakistani studies named after them, the American congressman who funded the mujahedin (now Taliban) through Pakistan's secret service, the Inter-Services Intelligence, is the stupidest person to choose. Remember how well Wilson's efforts turned out? Well, right here in Pakistan we have daily reminders. In the last week of December, a branch of the Peshawar Model School was attacked. The school, which offers private education to 12,000 of the poorest children in Peshawar, North-West Frontier Province, was targeted by the Pakistani Taliban – thanks, Charlie

Wilson – because it teaches girls and boys together. Two buses were burned to a crisp and ten others were quite seriously torched. A parcel of dynamite that exploded in the principal's office maimed several staff and groundskeepers.

US drones continue to breach Pakistani sovereignty, with the blessing of President Zardari, who proclaimed to those being anonymously killed that "the air strikes will go on". Somebody told him that was a bad PR move, so he quickly rescinded the proclamation.

The front page of a leading English-language daily last month carried a statement by General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, chief of army staff, in large, bold letters, "Kayani pledges matching response to India strike in no time". The story directly opposite read, in a considerably smaller font, "US missiles kill seven in South Waziristan". This referred to civilians killed on 22 December, but, in fact, the unmanned drones have been killing since the autumn.

While it remains acceptable for Americans to come and kill our citizens, Pakistan's government has issued bombastic and seemingly harsh statements to counter the threat of a possible Indian air strike following the fallout of the Mumbai massacres. It's nice to be distracted from an actual daily death toll, after all.

There's more, lots more legacy to contend with. At a mid-December Asia Society panel in New York, grave charges were placed against Pakistan. Salman Rushdie, no fan of Pakistan (and why would he be, when the country's parliament pledged its continued desire to prolong his fatwa and allowed several members publicly to offer to kill him after he was knighted in 2007), summed up the way people are now looking at Pakistan: "The headquarters of al-Qaeda, the headquarters of the Taliban, the headquarters of Lashkar-e-Toiba, the headquarters of Jaish-e-Mohammad is in the world centre of terrorism - Pakistan." For emphasis, he added, "All the roads of world terrorism lead to Pakistan."

For those Rushdie bashers who would be quick to fatwa him for that statement, it is worth remembering that he is as Pakistani as he is Indian, his family having moved to Karachi and lived and died there.

But it is not just Rushdie who lacks faith in this new Pakistan. A poll conducted in the country in October by the International Republican Institute showed that 88 per cent of Pakistanis think their country is heading in the wrong direction. Fifty-nine per cent said they felt their economic situation would worsen in the coming year and the PPP received a rating so unfavourable that the pollsters compared it to former President Pervez Musharraf's figures last January. Why should Pakistanis have any confidence in their government? Recently it was made known that the puppet prime minister, Yousuf Raza Gilani, had spent 50 million rupees on five foreign trips over the previous four months. That's something close to £450,000 - for one man (and his very large entourage, apparently). I smell corruption. You'd have no sense of smell if you didn't.

Legacies aren't enough in Pakistan. They never were, but now we have ample proof why. Personalities and dynasties are meaningless in a country where, every day, gastrointestinal disease kills children because they have no access to potable water. Legacies are insulting in the

face of mass suicides, carried out by members of Pakistan's poorer classes because they simply can no longer afford to live.

Mohammad Azam Khan worked for a private cable channel. He killed himself in early December, having not received a salary for five months. His colleagues held protest rallies around the country, but no one - especially not the media - wants us to remember his name or why he felt he had no choice but to take his own life.

Pakistanis have bigger problems to contend with, bigger causes to grieve for than Benazir Bhutto. And yet, a year on from her death, we are still at the mercy of our ghosts.