

Requiem For A Nation

*There's never a let-up in Pakistan's stalemate with violence — all that changes year to year are the victims. Benazir Bhutto's niece **FATIMA BHUTTO** traces a blood-drenched history*

IT IS said the Bhuttos die young. This past month, Benazir Bhutto became the fourth young Bhutto to be killed violently and senselessly. In Garhi Khuda Bux, the Bhuttos' ancestral graveyard, Benazir lies alongside her father, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, and her two brothers, Shahnawaz and my father, Murtaza. All four martyred, all before their time and all offered as sacrifices to the state of Pakistan.

Pakistan today is faced with an extraordinary crisis, one that is cyclical and all too familiar. Power in Pakistan never actually changes hands — it is only the victims that change.

Pakistan was born into a legacy of political violence. Benazir Bhutto was a victim, one of the many, of a State set-up that has knotted Pakistan's political future into a noose. Once politicians have ceased to serve their purpose, some are dismissed, others are deported, but by far the preferred mode of dealing with them is to have them killed.

Five years after Partition, Liaqat Ali Khan — the country's first appointed prime minister — was shot and killed. No one was ever charged with his murder. In 1979, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, the first democratically-elected leader of Pakistan, was executed by the military dictatorship of General Zia ul Haq. His youngest son, Shahnawaz, was killed in France five years later. His eldest son, Murtaza, my father, a member of Parliament, was assassinated in 1996 outside our home in Karachi. In 2006, Akbar Bugti, a renowned Baloch politician, was killed in Balochistan. And now we mourn the murder of Benazir Bhutto, another politician struck down in an attack on the people of this country.

Benazir Bhutto returned to Pakistan this year amidst growing criticism over her pro- American inclinations. A veteran politician, albeit one often flawed in her approach, Ms Bhutto began to adjust her leanings upon her return home. She began to speak to people, to travel the country (as she once did as a young woman starting out on her political career), and it became increasingly clear that Pakistan would never accept the satellite position the Bush White House has designated for it. Ms Bhutto would not be the conduit — she had decided that before her death, and she began to distance herself from the political appeasement of Musharraf and his foreign interests.

There is no certainty regarding Benazir Bhutto's killer, it could have been anyone. Her security, usually very strict, had a serious lapse that day. The killer, a young man, climbed onto her car and was able to fire his weapon straight into his target. Nothing was left to chance. Benazir Bhutto was dead by the time she reached hospital. The people of Pakistan, those who favoured her and those who did not, have been dazed by the cold violence that claimed her young life. Some have blamed Al Qaeda, some have blamed the government, others have made more sinister accusations.

This is the footing on which we in Pakistan must survive politically. Asif Zardari, Ms Bhutto's husband and now head of her party, met the news that the elections would be postponed till February 18 with great indignation. Crude as it is to say so, if ever there were a time to cash in on a sympathy vote, especially for an unpopular figure such as Zardari who was named Mr Ten Percent during his wife's first government and upgraded to Mr Fifty Percent in her second, this is it. However, Pakistan is reeling from a spate of incredible violence. Ms Bhutto's tragic assassination is certainly a dangerous signal for the country's future. In the days after her murder, people on the streets of Karachi were attacked, businesses set aflame, and transportation all but shut down. Weeks later, the law and order situation continues to deteriorate. Recently, the ordinarily calm Punjab province was hit by a suicide bomber who exploded himself in front of the Lahore High Court, killing 22 — mostly lawyers and policemen — and wounding over



As time has passed, the writ of the government has continued to weaken and the stranglehold of the establishment in Pakistan has tightened around the people. It is becoming increasingly difficult for the established power hierarchy to safely govern Pakistan. Where then do we go from here? On what balance does the future of Pakistan hang? On the people, that's where. While we as a nation have suffered countless political tribulations, our salvation ultimately lies in the empowerment of the people.

This past year, Pakistan witnessed several important portents of democratisation and democratic reform, but these changes did not occur at the top. Rather, they are part of a rising grassroots movement that has been earnestly and courageously raising a voice of dissatisfaction and a demand for change. First came the lawyers' movement, a heralding of civil disobedience and political protest. Lawyers across the country bravely took to the streets to call for the establishment of an independent judiciary. As fall dawned on the country and Pakistan was once again faced with a less-than-democratic declaration of Emergency, the lawyers were buoyed by another contingent of civil society — the media.

Pakistan has entered a profound media age where access to information and the freedom to disseminate facts has lifted the lid on debate, political discourse, and social commentary. More than 20 private channels now broadcast the news in various languages from Sindhi to Seraiki to Punjabi in a 24-hour format. Television channels are buzzing with political talk shows, politicians are called on air and directly questioned about their agendas, and the youth has been given a space in which to bring forward the demands of a new generation. The media in Pakistan has proved phenomenally resilient in the face of political turmoil and has slowly but genuinely cemented their role as part of a budding movement to foment democratic reform.

WOMEN, ORDINARY women, have begun publicly questioning the role of the State over their bodies and the violence towards their gender that is easily condoned by an archaic and oppressive Zia-era legislation, namely the Hudood Ordinance. Mukhtar Mai, an illiterate young woman from Northern Pakistan, made waves around the world when she openly spoke about her rape at the hands of powerful village elders and demanded that they be punished for their crimes against women like her. In Pakistan, Mukhtar Mai did more than make waves; she changed a culture. In a society where sexual violence is spoken about in hushed tones and brushed aside by the law, she refused to be a quiet victim. Her vocal insistence for justice opened the door for many other women to come forward and press the apparatus of the law, namely the police and the courts, to take crimes against women seriously. Certainly, the problem of sexual violence and rape has not been quelled here — and I can't think of a single country in the world where it has — but the silence and shame that comes with being a women violated has been seriously dented. That is no small achievement. Mukhtar Mai is not a member of Parliament, nor is she from a wealthy family, she is an ordinary citizen, and it is through her and others like her that we as a nation hope to battle the social and political inequities that continue to plague our country.

Ultimately, this is where we must concentrate our efforts. Once the people of Pakistan are empowered and are entrusted with the agency to collect their own taxes, be part of the dispensation of justice, control the arm of the law through a police system that is centered at a Union Council and not at a federal or provincial level, and are able to hold their representatives accountable through a system of guaranteed elections, then and only then will Pakistan's future be secure. If elections are held on February 18 as scheduled, then we Pakistanis (or at least us lucky few with ID cards, a minute percentage of our population) will take to the polls. If they are not free and if they are not fair, then we will continue to fight to make them so. The road ahead is a difficult one, but it is ours and we will struggle to make sure we build the Pakistan that we deserve.

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