

The daughter and the dictator



Benazir Bhutto is no champion of democracy, says her niece Fatima Bhutto (TOI Photo)

Politics has often been called the theatre of the absurd and nowhere is that more true today than in my country, Pakistan. General Pervez Musharraf, who seized power in 1999, has launched a post-modern coup, declaring emergency rule against his own administration last week. The only parties who stand to benefit from the emergency are the government and their allies. Contrary to what is reported in the Western press, one of these very beneficiaries is a twice-disgraced former Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto.

Ms Bhutto's dealings with the military have spared her (along with the leaders of several Islamic parties) from seriously suffering under this most recent emergency rule, which has been absolute and brutal. Ms Bhutto is allowed to speak freely - often holding impromptu press conferences in the gardens of her residences and giving long interviews to foreign news outlets. True, her movement has been restrained in recent days, but it doesn't go much farther than that.

The state has not treated her with the same vigilance that Asma Jahangir, for instance, the head of Pakistan's Human Rights Commission has endured. Mrs Jahangir, who has been placed under a 90-day lockdown, does not enjoy the same lax detainment that Ms Bhutto does, with her party officials coming and going to keep her company.

Ms Bhutto is desperate to be seen in the light of Aung San Suu Kyi, but there is no comparison between the two women. Ms Bhutto's obsequious dealings with the military in Pakistan has led people on the streets of Karachi to nickname her party, the Pakistan People's Party, the Pervez People's Party. In her latest bout of flip flops, Ms Bhutto, who returned to Pakistan after eight years of self-imposed exile through a deal with Gen Musharraf, has reversed her previous proclamations.

"I will not be Musharraf's future Prime Minister," Ms Bhutto said on Tuesday, followed by an ominous pause. "Even if I wanted to, I would not have the popular support. Everything he touches becomes contaminated." This is certainly true of Ms Bhutto, who by negotiating with the military in the hopes of being ushered into the Prime Minister's office for the third time has actively fostered an unviable, undemocratic state in Pakistan.

Beloved by the West for her charm and crisp English accent, Ms Bhutto has reinvented herself as a champion of democracy. She has insisted constantly that our country has no democratic future without her; think of her as a democratic Mother Teresa.

However, nothing is further from the truth. The terms of her deal with the military are profoundly undemocratic. Ms Bhutto, who lost both her governments on grounds of massive corruption, demanded two things from Gen Musharraf: the first was that all her corruption charges be unilaterally dropped. She bypassed the judiciary entirely, crippling the very essence of our legal system and asked to be placed above the law of the land.

Musharraf indulged Ms Bhutto by passing the repellent National Reconciliation Ordinance, which has erased twenty years' corruption charges against politicians and includes a provision that guarantees future cases cannot be easily lodged against sitting parliamentarians.

The ordinance was being contested in the Supreme Court, but with the emergency came the announcement that all laws passed prior to the declaration can no longer be legally challenged. Yet another dictatorial bonus for Ms Bhutto.

Her corruption surpasses even our own borders: Ms Bhutto has gone truly global. She was convicted by Swiss courts for taking roughly \$11 millions dollars in kickbacks in the Cotecna corruption case (a ruling she is currently appealing).

In addition, Ms Bhutto faces a money laundering trial in Spain, a property commission's case in England, and has been accused of giving \$ 2 million in kickbacks to Saddam Hussein's regime through the Oil for Food program. Imagine the kind of leader capable of bribing Saddam. It's not pretty. But thanks to the ordinance and her deal with Musharraf, Ms. Bhutto is not accountable for her domestic crimes nor is she answerable for them.

Her second demand was that the constitution, already mauled by successive military governments, be amended to make two significant changes in her favour. The first—spoken like a true democrat—was that the two-term limit for the prime ministership be dropped and the second sought the removal of Article 582b.

The article, which allows the President to depose his Prime Minister, does nothing to further democracy, it only goes to safeguard centralised power. We Pakistanis do not want the President to have ultimate power, nor do we want the Prime Minister to have absolute reign. We want the people to have power, we want to arm them with complete agency and invest them with real authority; they are, after all, the rightful rulers of this country.

What is most troubling about Ms Bhutto's posturing is the message that it sends to the world. Ms Bhutto has signaled that democracy is only possible, as the fundamentalists of the region have long believed, through an American puppet.

Since the military coup eight years ago we, writers, activists and citizens, have been wrestling against press censorship, confronting the government's policy of disappearances, and raising our voices against violence towards women. It has not been easy. Ms Bhutto's promotion through the Bush White House only belittles our concerns for reform by validating the fears of the Islamists who believe we are agents of a nefarious neo-con agenda. Pakistan's democratic future hangs in the balance. It will continue to hang uncertain for so long

as demo-dictators like Gen Musharraf and Benazir Bhutto are allowed to commandeer politics to further their own ambition. And that is in no one's interest—not the region's, not the people's, and not Pakistan's.

(Fatima Bhutto is a writer. She is the daughter of Murtaza Bhutto, who was killed in 1996 in Karachi when his sister Benazir was PM)