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A hundred beats

Frequently asked questions
By Fatima Bhutto

When I started writing this column just about a year ago, I made a decision to put my email address at the bottom of my articles. It isn't a phantom address or a lonely inbox that I created specifically for this column; it's my only email address. I am the only one with access to it and I do my best to read and reply to all the letters I receive. I have truly enjoyed hearing from enthused and disgruntled readers, it's been a privilege to have the opportunity to interact with so many different kinds of people and engage in conversation and debate. The readers that write in to me are critical and aware, they're sharp and impassioned and I'd like to thank everyone of them who has written in with a question or a comment -- you've helped me learn so much on this journey of ours.

However, and there is always a however, I do get my fair share bizzarro mail. They're often packed with good intentions, but misguided nonetheless. I'd like to take some time out to answer some frequently asked questions once and for all. Bear with me.

FAQ 1: I've read some of your articles online and wanted to write and ask you what you do?

Uh. This. This is what I do. It's not a nine to five job but it's my job. I write. It's not exactly strenuous but it's what I love to do and it takes up a lot of my time, thank you very much.

FAQ 2: Could I have your cell number so we can discuss this further?

No.

FAQ 3: Are you related to the Bhutto family?

Yes. But don't let that get to you. I'm an individual, not a family.

FAQ 4: Seriously though, if you won't give me your cell number, could we at least make friendship?

No.

FAQ 5: Are you going to go into politics?

I usually respond to this one by asking the same question back – are you? I believe it is every responsible citizen's duty to be politically aware and involved. If we are to do something with this country of ours, we have to take an active stake in our politics. Don't forget that being politically invested in one's country comes in many forms -- voting, campaigning for social issues, protesting, writing, organising. Don't wait for some lame PML candidate to stand for elections in your district, if you're qualified (by this I don't mean in possession of a BA pass certificate) and you're ready to devote your life to public service then let's bring in some fresh blood. Ultimately, I don't believe that my surname or my background immediately qualifies me for politics. I don't believe that it's a birthright, unlike some people, ahem. I believe in contributing positively. People say 'you could have such an impact in politics!' Yes, but it could be a bad impact. Look at Hitler, he had an impact in politics and I can say we can all agree that he should have stayed a painter. If I can make a positive impact, then we'll see. Until then, I quite enjoy my current job.

FAQ 6: Will you marry me?

Yes.

FAQ 7: What do you think about free and fair elections being held this year?

I don't appreciate smoke and mirrors. The upcoming elections, if indeed they are held, will neither be free nor fair, let's not kid ourselves on this one. I don't think democracy is embodied simply by elections -- that's only a basic condition -- dictators have been holding elections for years. Remember Zia? These kinds of elections, maybe we should call them 'free and fair selections', only validate the dictatorship to its foreign donors and bosses, it does not empower the people. Spare me the farce. I'm interested in legitimate democracy, not a mockery of the demos.

FAQ 8: I hated your article on Shumail and Shahzina, the 'she couple'. You are clearly western oriented and obviously an atheist and a lesbian.

Ah, my favourite. You may notice there's not even a question involved, so I'll stick to pointing out some basic facts. Hijras have existed in the subcontinent for centuries; they were quite popular with the Mughals, in fact. Transexuality is not a western concept. Why is Begum

Nawazish Ali acceptable and not Shumail and Shahzina? Is it because the Begum wears expensive saris and sits on a popular cable channel and Shumail and Shahzina are ordinary middle class Pakistanis? Don't be so fickle. Also, there is someone who is in total support of all you anti S&S bigots. You might know him, his name is George W Bush and he completely agrees with you on the issue.

FAQ 9: What do you think about Benazir's deal with Musharraf?

My mother always told me that if you can't say anything nice about someone you shouldn't say anything at all. That being said, I think the 'deal' speaks volumes about those involved. Don't forget, Benazir (I miss using Benawazir, but it's sadly not appropriate here) made quite a similar deal with the army back in 1988. She could have been Zia's prime minister, now she's hoping to be Musharraf's. Awesome. I hope she does sign the deal and exposes herself once and for all. I only feel sorry for the people who'll have to deal with this dynamic duo.

FAQ 10: Why is there a goofy smiling photograph of you over your articles?

I don't know. The News picked it. Should I send over a more dire one?

FAQ 11: What do you think about the threat of emergency being imposed?

You mean the emergency that will be put over the already existing emergency we're living under? You mean martial law redux? Dictatorship the sequel? New and improved authoritarianism, now with 20 per cent more vim and vigour? One emergency rule is the problem, once you have that in place it really doesn't matter how many more emergency rules you pile over it.

FAQ 12: Would you like to be added to my poetry/jihad/Marxist/botanists yahoo group?

No. Not that you listen, I'm part of more groups than you can imagine. Please take me off your lists and while we're at it stop creating email accounts in my name. It's not funny. And by the way, that's not me on Orkut either.

So there we have it. I hope I've answered your questions adequately. Keep writing in.