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Bhutto's People's Party on the Wane?

PPP – a party running in loss? The Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP), Pakistan's largest political entity founded in 1967 by former Prime Minister (PM) Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, currently finds a double crisis. On the one hand the party faces a serious crisis of credibility among the masses that it represents and the second is a crisis of commitment, or lack of it, to the ideals that Bhutto and later his charismatic daughter Benazir Bhutto stood and struggled for. The image and the performance of the party is revolving around the personality and performance of its co-chairman and President, Asif Ali Zardari who "has no feel of the pulse of the people – he has become completely detached from reality and (is) living in a bunker" and "there is probably not much space there for making more mistakes," Ahmed Bilal Mehboob, Pakistan's prominent political commentator noted in a news item to The Age.¹ The news item said that Zardari's approval rating was 19% in January 2009 against his predecessor, military dictator-president General (r) Musharraf's 17%.

PPP's brief background:

Political circumstances surrounding the party: At a time when the socialist-led students movement was sweeping the world in the late 1960s, Bhutto's populist manifesto galvanized people in the length and breadth of Pakistan, giving his party the second largest chunk of seats in the then parliament that comprised East and West Pakistan in 1970. The nationalist Awami League led by Sheikh Mujeebur Rehman from what is Bangladesh today had won the majority but Bhutto's reluctance to share power with Rehman and the military president General Yahya Khan's reservations on Rehman's closeness with archrival India, resulted in a power struggle that stoked the already simmering separatist movement beyond control. Active support by the Indian intelligence agencies for the League's militant wing Mukti Bahni and the eventual Indian invasion of East Pakistan

led to the break up and resulted in the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent country in December 1971 and the capitulation of over 90,000 Pakistani soldiers to the Indian army.

Bhutto rises to the occasion: The disgraced President, General Yahya Khan handed over power to Bhutto, who embarked on a painful journey of rubbing off the humiliation of defeat, reviving Pakistanis' confidence, convening the national parliament and negotiating 90,000 prisoners out of the Indian captivity. Bhutto also successfully led the preparation and implementation of a consensus Constitution in 1973, under which he became the first elected PM of Pakistan, until General Ziaul Haq ousted him in July 1977. Bhutto was hanged in April 1979 after a controversial ruling by the Supreme Court, which had found him guilty of murdering a political opponent. From then on, his wife Nusrat Bhutto and daughter Benazir Bhutto took the reins of the party and waged a struggle that climaxed in December 1988 with Benazir Bhutto becoming the PM after winning the majority in the general elections. She also won a second term in October 1993. In the general elections on February 18, 2008, the PPP again secured a simple majority, probably riding on the wave of sympathy generated by the gruesome assassination of Benazir Bhutto minutes after an election rally in Rawalpindi on Dec 27, 2007.

Party becoming from stronger to weaker: Now, the PPP's journey from scratch in 1967 to four stints in power – one under Bhutto senior, two under daughter Benazir Bhutto and the current one practically under Asif Ali Zardari, Ms. Bhutto's widower, is based on a legacy that Mr. Bhutto had left behind; Roti, Kapra Aur Makaan (bread, clothing, and shelter) was the slogan that touched hearts and minds and lives on even today. Through the socialist-style nationalization of industries and radical workers' rights reforms, Bhutto also

¹ <http://www.theage.com.au/world/bungling-zardari-squanders-the-bhutto-legacy-20090320-94h3.html?page=-1>. Last accessed on March 21, 2009.

endeared himself with millions of workers in the industrial and agricultural sectors. Regardless of the disastrous impact that the nationalization had on Pakistan's economy and politics in the years to come, millions of poor Pakistanis looked at Bhutto as someone who had given them dignity. That, in short, is why thousands endured rigorous jail terms, many immolated themselves and scores committed suicides to protest Bhutto's execution. With the passage of time party's vote bank has considerably shrunk, yet the PPP still prides itself as an entity that sits deep in the working class, probably because Bhutto senior had promised the common man what he yearns for the whole life; work, shelter and self-respect above all. Yet, since returning to power in March 2008, the PPP, led by President Zardari, seems to be on a drift away from the common man.

Plummeting ratings of the party & leadership: If approval ratings are indicative enough of the political trends in Pakistan, then no other government, in the recent political history of Pakistan, has slipped as sharply as Yousaf Raza Gillani-led PPP's government has – 64% in June 2008 and 19% in December 2008.² Party's co-chairman and President of Pakistan, Asif Ali Zardari's approval ratings also indicated the sharp decline on the basis of his perceived credibility by the people of Pakistan – 45% in June 2008 and 20% in December 2008. While his main political contender, Mian Nawaz Sharif's approval ratings were 60% in December 2008.³ According to a New York Times report in the last week of February 2009: "Mr. Sharif's approval ratings outstripped Mr. Zardari's by large margins."⁴ In an essay on the World Socialist Website, Zardari's approval rating was noted as 13% against Nawaz Sharif's 86%.⁵ Zardari is also the Vice President of Socialist International, according the last paragraph of his official bio.⁶

Is PPP what its leadership is? As the party and its leadership face tumultuous political times, the party's leadership took extremely unpopular decisions over the past one year that included its co-chairman's backtracking from three written agreements with Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), PPP's then coalition partner in the Center and Punjab, mainly on the issue of restoration of judiciary to November 2, 2007's position. Political agreements are "not like Quran or Hadith," Zardari had said in August 2008 referring to the agreements that he had earlier inked with Nawaz Sharif.⁷ Pakistan is an honor-based society and these words will haunt PPP for a long time with nothing in defense coming from the party.

President Zardari, who has become the face of the party and was unanimously chosen by the party as party's co-chairman, also made himself unpopular with the powerful Pakistani establishment by issuing statements on key Pakistani issues including Kashmir and the nuclear doctrine.⁸ In his inaugural address to the joint session of the Parliament, Zardari said that he would be the first ever president willing to "surrender" the presidential powers his predecessor military dictator President, General (r) Musharraf had accumulated under the 17th Constitutional Amendment that included the power to dismiss the government and dissolve the Parliament. Once in the office, Zardari did not move anything as he had promised and his close aides, including then Law Minister Farooq Hamid Naek, carved out an argument that the political parties in the National Assembly should bring in a "consensus bill" for the 18th Constitutional Amendment to reverse the powers back to the Parliament and Prime Minister.

Character assassination or reality? A Wall Street Journal story in February 2009 said that President Zardari continuously insulted the senior cabinet ministers and party leaders. These included former Information Minister, Sherry Rahman and former leader of the House in Senate, Senator Raza Rabbani. Sherry was

² IRI surveys

³ Ibid.

⁴ NYT, February 25, 2009.

⁵ <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2008/jul2008/pak-j01.shtml>. Last accessed on March 20, 2009.

⁶ <http://www.presidentofpakistan.gov.pk/default.aspx>. Last accessed on March 22, 2009.

⁷ Daily Times, August 24, 2008.

⁸ President Zardari hinted at "some good news" by the end of this month in his press conference on September 9, 2008. And "We will most certainly not use it first," in a video conference interview with Indian notables on November 22, 2008. "This is the first time that Pakistan has advocated the policy of no-first use of nuclear weapons," India's prestigious The Hindu's front page read on November 23, 2008.

called a “witch” and Rabbani “impotent.”⁹ The spokesperson to the President, Farhatullah Babar rejected the story but the atmosphere prevails among the political observers that this could have been true. Later, both the leaders resigned from their political titles and Sherry was also removed unceremoniously from her party office of the Secretary Information. A hawkish Fauzia Wahab replaced her and in her first ever press conference as the Secretary Information demanded “self censorship” from the media.¹⁰ Sherry’s removal did not promote the democratic credentials and the inside management of the party. It is commonly believed that Zardari’s inner circle of friends also play the role of his political aides and advisors. Most of them are hawks in key administrative positions with absolutely no or very-little political training. In the presence of these people, the larger view and input from the party workers, parliamentarians and leaders was simply ignored that pushed the party, its government and leadership deeper in the hole of unpopularity.

Party’s silence on a constitutional aberration: On the day of the oath-taking of the new 50 Senators on March 12, 2009, the copy of the constitution given to the House included the constitutional amendments that General (r) Musharraf had brought under his Emergency Order on November 3, 2007. Senator Ibrahim Khan, Jamaat-e-Islami, pointed to this fact as these were made the part of the Constitution without following the due parliamentary procedure but his concerns fell on the deaf ears. The oath was administered. The government and the party did not say anything and this was misnomer-ed as constitutional. Referring to the President, one of Pakistan’s leading commentators, Talat Masood said that Zardari was “destroying Bhutto’s legacy.”¹¹ It was PM Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, President Zardari’s hanged and politically-immortalized father in law who made the Constitution that all the political entities of Pakistan had mutually agreed on in 1973.

Issues that party-ranks failed to take the right-side on: Among a few others, the following make the most important issues which the party

and its leadership should have stood on the right side:

1. **Zardari’s agreements with Nawaz Sharif:** These either shouldn’t have been inked or must have been adhered to. PPP’s late Chairperson, Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto, also signed a political-policy document called, Charter of Democracy in May 2006; the present government should have respected its articles.
2. **Reversal of the 17th Amendment to empower the Parliament:** President Zardari should have kept his words to “surrender” his powers under the 17th Amendment.
3. **Restoration of the judges:** All the deposed judges, especially the Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, should have been restored as promised by late Benazir Bhutto and various other PPP leaders when they were in opposition. People of Pakistan got them restored, via the unprecedented non-violent Long March, in the wee hours of March 16 via an Executive Order of the Prime Minister. The lawyers and the opposition were demanding this action for over a year. Islamabad was completely sealed and according to news reports, containers around Islamabad were welded together so that they could not be moved as it happened in Lahore where a lifter kept removing them from the roads. Pakistan’s Army Chief also played an important role in “getting the deal done.” This is not interpreted as a good sign for Pakistan’s fledgling democracy. For Pakistan to become a democracy, “civilian leaders will be required to display a level of tact and competence that has not yet been evident.”¹² The competence level was exposed on the mismanagement of a political issue via administrative crackdown that gravely destabilized Pakistan on the occasion of Long March.
4. **Imposition of the governor’s rule in Punjab:** The party and its leadership totally failed in preventing what is termed as totally unnecessary, uncalled for and noted as an insult to the mandate of nearly 90 million people of the Punjab

⁹ <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123561113179577559.html>.

Last accessed on March 18, 2009.

¹⁰ Broadcasted live on TV channels on March 19, 2009.

¹¹ Ibid to # 2.

¹² The Idea of Pakistan by Stephen P. Cohen; page 278.

province. As of March 22, 2009, the hawks in the party have failed to “deliver Punjab.”

5. **Expulsion of and issuance of a show-cause notice to Barrister Aitzaz Ahsan:**

Aitzaz is among the most senior politicians of Pakistan and the PPP. On February 17, 2009, the party leadership expelled him from the Central Executive Committee. He was also issued a show-cause notice by party’s Secretary General, Jehangir Badar.¹³

Late Benazir Bhutto’s political secretary, Nahid Khan, said on March 22, 2009, at the occasion of hoisting the Pakistani flag at the restored Chief Justice’s residence that: “PPP is a party of the people of Pakistan but I see that the gap between the leadership and people has increased. This needs to be bridged.” Nahid, her husband along with many other mainstream PPP leaders who once were close to late Benazir Bhutto are now pushed outside the arena and those are now ruling inside the party who are Zardari’s favorites.

A political party is being run in a non-political manner and silence prevails within.

¹³ PPP’s Secretary Information hinted that if Aitzaz would “appeal” to party leadership, he expulsion from the CEC might be reconsidered. The News, March 22, 2009.