

# Mrs. Bhutto under pressure: Is the end-game in progress?

by Ramtanu Maitra

A series of recent domestic events led Pakistan's Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto to cancel her plans to visit the member states of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in late August. The announcement canceling the travel plans of Bhutto, the present chairperson of the SAARC, was made at the same time that about 150,000 demonstrators, observing the first anniversary of the death of President Zia ul-Haq, chanted slogans in Islamabad accusing the Bhutto family of being "assassins." Subsequently, the Pakistan Foreign Office spokesman announced that Bhutto will also skip both the Non-Aligned Movement heads of State summit meeting in Belgrade in September and the United Nations General Assembly session in New York in November.

The show of strength by the pro-Zia opposition on Aug. 17 near the Faisal Mosque, where the late President lies buried, was followed by a press conference of Mian Nawaz Sharif, the Punjab chief minister and leader of the anti-Bhutto opposition. Nawaz Sharif, flanked by the late President's sons, Ijazul Haq and Anwarul Haq, told newsmen that Bhutto had "exhausted her mandate" after eight months in power. He also accused her of "accepting Indian hegemony"—an accusation often used to incite the mullahs in Pakistan—and said his party, the Islamic Democratic Alliance (IDA)—an alliance of the pro-Zia Muslim League and the orthodox Jamaat-e-Islami, "would charge-sheet the prime minister for not safeguarding the national interests."

## Not empty rhetoric

It is evident that the Punjab chief minister is not relying on empty rhetoric. A few days later, President Ghulam Ishaq Khan, a Zia associate who became President following the sudden death of President Zia, turned down the earlier request of Benazir Bhutto to remove Adm. Iftikhar Ahmad Sirohey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee. Admiral Sirohey, another Zia associate, was scheduled to retire in August, but President Ishaq Khan wants him to continue for another two years in order to complete his three-year tenure. Prime Minister Bhutto, for obvious reasons, refrained from criticizing the President's move, but her mother, Begum Nusrat Bhutto, a senior minister in Bhutto's cabinet, was more outspoken. She was quoted by the Lahore daily *The*

*Nation* saying, "Zia had gone but Ishaq Khan has taken his place."

What Begum Bhutto was referring to is the discretionary power that the late President Mohammed Zia ul-Haq had amassed in his hands through the eighth amendment of the 1973 Constitution and which got passed on to President Ishaq Khan. The eighth amendment power had enabled President Zia to dismiss Prime Minister Junejo's cabinet on May 29, 1988 without consulting the cabinet or the electorate. Since the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) came to power in December 1988, Bhutto and her party campaigned vigorously to repeal the amendment but, lacking the required two-third's majority in the National Assembly, the amendment has remained intact.

## The hornets' nest

According to Pakistani media, Bhutto's latest series of problems have something to do with her recently activated campaign against the drug mafia. It is evident that Karachi, the most populous and largest port city in Pakistan, has become in essence a sprawling drugden and the drug-military-politician connections have made the city highly vulnerable to any shift in the political wind of the country. Since Mian Nawaz Sharif's strident speech on the anniversary of President Zia's death, another riot has broken out in Karachi pitting the Mohajirs—an ethnic group that migrated from India after the formation of Pakistan—against the Punjabi-Pakhtoon alliance. Prime Minister Bhutto, in a recent interview with Lahore newsmen, said the drug mafia had put up a lot of money against the government. Similar statements have also been issued by Begum Bhutto from her home at Larkhana, accusing the drug mafia and opposition parties of using trained terrorists in Karachi to weaken the PPP government. According to the Indian Hindi-language daily *Navbharat Times*, Bhutto's Afghan policy to shift arms and financial support away from the fundamentalist Afghan mujahideen leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar—a big name in the Afghan drug trade, but definitely not the biggest—may have made her a prime target of the drug mafia. Meanwhile, it has been reported that the U.S. State Department rejected a request from Hekmatyar to make an official visit to the United States this summer.

With the dramatic arrest of Lt. Gen. (ret.) Fazle Haq last July, former governor of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and President Zia's right-hand man in that province, has erupted a crisis within the pro-Zia opposition, as it signaled that Bhutto is now ready to go for silencing the big guns. Fazle Haq, a member of the National Assembly representing the IDA, was accused by *EIR* in 1981 for his connections with the drug mafia, and it has been subsequently reported that during President Zia's rule, the Pakistan Narcotics Control Board (PNCB) personnel had seized heroin from his personal vehicle which, they suspect, may have been used for transshipment of heroin within Pakistan.

Fazle Haq, however, has not yet been charged with drug-peddling and instead, the charges against him indicate that Bhutto's government considers him the mastermind behind the killing of Imam Al-Husseini, the most powerful Shi'ite leader in Pakistan. Al-Husseini, who learned the Islamic theology from none other than the late Ayatollah Khomeini in Qom, had close contacts with the Iranian leaders, and his assassination, which his followers had attributed to President Zia, created an unruly and ugly scene in the troubled border areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Significantly, Al-Husseini's assassination came a few days before President Zia died when the C-130 Hercules that was carrying him and some of his top generals blew up in the air only seven minutes after takeoff, leaving no survivors and very few traces.

Fazle Haq's involvement in the murder of the Shia leader, which led to his arrest, has been attested to by the confession of one of the hitmen. According to available reports, Al-Husseini had close contacts with the Afghan mujahideen and was buying U.S.-made and -supplied stinger missiles from them and passing those missiles to the Iranians. The Iranians, it has been reported, were using the same stinger missiles against the U.S. Navy during their confrontation in the Gulf. Whether this is wholly or partially true, it is nonetheless widely known that Lt. Gen. Fazle Haq was as close to President Zia as he is now to Mian Nawaz Sharif. Hence, the arrest of Fazle Haq has definitely created a crisis within the IDA leadership.

### **The devil's advocate**

Although there is no evidence that Mian Nawaz Sharif, a wealthy Punjabi industrialist indoctrinated into power politics by President Zia, is in direct league with the drug barons, it is nonetheless clear that Nawaz Sharif is willing to join hands with anyone that wants to topple the PPP government. Interestingly, Mian Nawaz Sharif was in the United States in early June, preempting Bhutto's visit later that month, and has friends in Washington. It is also widely known that Nawaz Sharif has strong connections with a powerful faction within the Pakistani Army—not the least of whom is Maj. Gen. Imranullah, the Rawalpindi Corps Commander. Rawalpindi, a garrison town a few miles away from Islamabad, continues to be the stronghold of pro-Zia Army officers. It is

also the town from where the Afghan mujahideen were supplied arms till the major arms and ammunition dump, Ojheri, blew up in 1988. It is also Rawalpindi from where the Soviet-backed mullahs and Nawaz Sharif's men launched their demonstration—allegedly to protest against the American reprinting of the controversial Salman Rushdie novel, *The Satanic Verses*—which culminated with police firings, momentary siege of the American Center in Islamabad, and the death of at least six people. There was never any doubt in the role of the garrison town in making that demonstration a "success."

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While it is evident that the Punjab Chief Minister and the pro-Zia Army brass have many friends in the United States, so long a key player in determining who rules Pakistan, Bhutto's strength within the Army lies with her Chief of Armed Service, Gen. Mirza Aslam Beg. General Beg, belonging to the province of Sindh where the Bhuttos hail from, has assured the nation on more than one occasion that the Army's role, under his leadership, is to strengthen the government. As late as Aug. 10, seven days before Mian Nawaz Sharif told newsmen that Bhutto had lost her electoral mandate and should not be allowed to govern for the scheduled five years, General Beg, addressing senior officers in Rawalpindi, said that the Armed Forces was to provide "an umbrella of external and internal security under which the political system could run its course for the realization of national goals of socio-economic progress." "National institutions like the Armed Forces have to play their assigned role of maintaining an environment of security in which the political system chosen by the people could function unhindered," he added.

Meanwhile, in the United States, intelligence sources report that there are some in the U.S. government exerting pressure on Bhutto to dump General Beg. It is evident that if General Beg is removed, Major General Imranullah and his ilk will have a clear road to power.

There are reasons to believe that the end-game is in progress, and if it goes either the military or the eighth amendment route, the region—which includes Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan—will be thrown into still more turmoil. In Pakistan, blood will flow as never before.