

The weakening of Benazir Bhutto and its fallout

by Ramtanu Maitra and Susan Maitra

Pakistan Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto is acting desperate in the face of a rising crescendo for early elections. On Jan. 21, the day Pakistan's "establishment representative," Foreign Minister Yaqub Khan, arrived in New Delhi to discuss the growing difficulties in bilateral relations, Bhutto, in a statement broadcast by the state-run television, announced that the recent developments in the state of Jammu and Kashmir (the Indian part of Kashmir) "are not only a matter of grave concern for the people of Pakistan but have caused resentment in the Muslim Ummah [nation]."

Prime Minister Bhutto is referring to the increased confrontation between the secessionists and fundamentalists with the law-and-order officials, causing death and despair all over the Kashmir Valley. Since the beginning of the winter, the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), helped by a cache of arms and unlimited funds reportedly from outside, and various other secessionist groups and the fundamentalists have taken to the streets demanding an independent Kashmir and demonstrating they are ready to sacrifice their lives for it. The situation has grown worse over the last few weeks and New Delhi has appointed a governor known for his no-nonsense style, and put the state under Governor's Rule.

A disputed territory

Kashmir, a disputed territory, is located in the north of the subcontinent bordering China, India, and Pakistan. Its northernmost point is not far from Afghanistan and the Soviet Union. The dispute arose soon after the British exit in 1947, leaving a partitioned subcontinent and 500-odd princely states, including Kashmir, to determine whether to merge with India or Pakistan. Before the Maharaja of Kashmir could announce his intention to merge with India, the princely state of Kashmir experienced an invasion from the west. Although Pakistan, to date, claims that the invaders were locals, there were strong indications that they were actually Pakistani soliders dressed as locals. The lightning strike helped the invaders to occupy almost

half of the state. Since then, an uneasy line of actual control separates the two nations in Kashmir.

While India has officially integrated Jammu and Kashmir as part of the Indian Union, the Pakistan-held part has remained Azad Kashmir (Free Kashmir) and autonomous. However, for all practical purposes, Azad Kashmir is as much a part of Pakistan as the other four provinces in that country. Pakistan insists that all of Kashmir is part of Pakistan and part of it is "illegally" held by the Indians, and demands that Kashmir must be liberated. India, though apparently more flexible, has never renounced its claim to the entire Kashmir.

Since the majority of the people living in Kashmir are Muslims, the *raison d'être* behind the formation of Pakistan in 1947, the Kashmir issue has been kept in the forefront by the anti-India lobby in Pakistan. This is a powerful lobby politically, consisting of the mullahs belonging to many fundamentalist groupings, the new-look Islamic army created by the late President Mohammad Zia ul-Haq and pseudo-nationalists who use the anti-India rhetoric to slander anyone they choose. The Simla Agreement in 1972, signed by Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, laid the foundation for a bilateral negotiation to settle Kashmir and other disputed issues between the two nations. However, with the takeover by President Zia in 1977 through a military coup which ended up in the hanging of Prime Minister Bhutto two years later, the winds were taken out of the agreement. There were hopes when Benazir Bhutto took over as prime minister that the Simla Agreement would be the basis for the two countries to negotiate solutions to disputed matters and develop a constructive relationship.

As late as last October, while in Kuala Lumpur, Benazir Bhutto told the *Business Times* that the outstanding disputes with India over Kashmir and Siachen glacier (another point of contention) should be settled on "a step by step" basis "to build mutual trust and confidence." In three months Bhutto has changed her tune; she is now competing with her enemies within Pakistan to out-shout each other on the Kashmir issue.

What went wrong?

Between October 1989 and January 1990 Bhutto has been seriously weakened politically. The no-confidence motion brought by the combined opposition to oust the Bhutto administration through votes in the National Assembly last November, showed that in one year Bhutto had lost 23 member-supporters in the National Assembly, and she survived the opposition onslaught by the skin of her teeth. During the horse-trading to win over various Assembly members, Bhutto came under serious attack from the mullahs belonging to the Jamaat-e-Islami and the chief minister of Punjab, Nawaz Sharif. Bhutto was labeled an agent of the "Zionist" and "Indian" lobby. The prime minister's failure to counter the

charges politically was apparent.

Since Bhutto has handed over the running of Pakistan's rickety economy to the International Monetary Fund, as a measure to please Washington, the economic promises that she and her party, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), made to the people prior to the 1988 elections, have been left unfulfilled. Pakistan's economy is now bracing up for a strong dose of austerity, the kind that began street riots in Venezuela last February.

The failure to move the economy, the loss of supporters to ruthless opponents in the Combined Opposition in the National Assembly, and her inability to divert the slanders of the mullahs and the Muslim League, have crippled Bhutto. Added to her problem is the much-ballyhooed military exercise carried out by the Pakistan Army. Code-named *Zarb-e-Momeen* (Strike of the Faithful), the exercise was a media hype to refurbish the Army's image as the main institution in the protection of national security. The effort was led by Chief of Army staff Gen. Mirza Aslam Beg—an immigrant from the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh who makes known his view that it is India which is the enemy, while Afghanistan is a fraternal brother. The Army was on the defensive when the 1988 elections were held following President Zia's sudden death after presiding over a highly unpopular rule of 11 years. It is almost a repeat performance of the 1970s. Then, after an ignominious surrender to the Indian Army and loss of the eastern wing of Pakistan—not to speak of the atrocities committed in what is now Bangladesh—the army leaders were in deep depression. But six years of Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's misrule brought the Army back as a better alternative.

Mischief making

During the last month or so, a massive campaign has been started by the opposition to dismiss the "fascist" PPP regime and hold fresh elections soon. Although the charge is led by the unscrupulous Punjab chief minister, the pressure on the President to dismiss the Bhutto administration is apparently coming also from the army and the mullahs. U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan Robert Oakley, who, according to one scribe, sits through meetings of top-level Pakistani government officials—which surely makes things awkward for Bhutto—is meeting each and every opposition leader in Pakistan. Apparently, the Bush administration has not made up its mind to give the green light for fresh elections. It is somewhat interlinked with the fact that Washington is in the process of decoupling from the Afghanistan imbroglio in order to lay the ground for a summer Bush-Gorbachov summit. It is expected that the date for signing the "negative symmetry" accord will be determined soon after the Baker-Shevardnadze meeting in Moscow on Feb. 6-7.

Nonetheless, it is evident that U.S. Ambassador Robert Oakley will soon give President Ghulam Ishaq Khan the

necessary signals and a mid-term poll may be held in Pakistan as soon as early summer. This is also understood by Benazir Bhutto, as indicated when she told the BBC in a recent interview that her party is prepared to face mid-term polls. This is the first time that Bhutto, who had earlier repeatedly rejected the notion, has hinted at the possibility of snap elections. Reportedly, she has also met with the chief election commissioner recently.

Having accepted this eventuality, Bhutto, not unlike her father, is trying to woo the disparate forces who have rejected her because of her Western upbringing, gender, and family name. It is this desperate wooing that culminated in her call for the Muslim Ummah to take note of the "injustices committed by the Indian government" in Kashmir. Whether she will be able to make the mullahs lift the charge that she is "pro-India" is yet another matter, but the risk she is taking, besides being politically counterproductive, is enormous.

Though Bhutto's outburst on Kashmir must be viewed against this background and should not occasion undue reaction in India, her statement that her government supports the "just cause of the Kashmiri people" and that she would make "no compromise on the question of the right of self-determination of the people of Jammu and Kashmir because this right belongs to them," sends the wrong signals to the mischief makers.

Already, Sardar Abdul Qayyum Khan, president of Azad Kashmir and who recently shared the podium in Islamabad with the Pakistan-based JKLF leader, Amanullah Khan, has told newsmen that more deaths in the Indian part of Kashmir "could spark a tidal wave" across the porous 1,400 km border. "People are becoming deaf to reason and logic," Khan said. "An emotional situation is brewing," he added. There is also fear that Bhutto's statement, since it refers to the Muslim Ummah, will draw anti-India reactions from Saudi Arabia and other Arab nations, who are already funding the Muslim fundamentalists in Jammu and Kashmir.

In India, on the other hand, the Hindu fundamentalist-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which now supports the government from outside and wields a good deal of influence on the Punjab and Kashmir issues, has strongly condemned Bhutto's outburst. Party theoretician K.R. Malkani, in a polemical article in the *Times of India* on Jan. 22, pointed out: "Reopening the territorial issue will be like opening a Pandora's Box. In the process, even a Muslim-majority province like Sindh may wish to opt out of Pakistan! These are games at which two can play—and the bigger side no doubt has the better hand!"

Malkani's veiled threat is an indicator of just how far-reaching an effect rash statements have. Bhutto's political weakness can become a handy alibi for furthering tensions in the subcontinent. Bhutto should know that there are many waiting in the wings—Britain and China in particular—to see yet another flare-up between India and Pakistan.