

From New Delhi by Ramtanu Maitra

Benazir Bhutto's 'principles'

First ousted, and her husband imprisoned, the former premier is now making rotten compromises with her oppressor.

Following the dismissal of the elected government of Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on April 18, it came to light that the all-powerful President, Ghulam Ishaq Khan, needed 11th-hour help from Benazir Bhutto. In August 1990, her government, too, was sent packing by Ishaq Khan, and she was threatened with prison for corruption. Notwithstanding, she held a tête-à-tête with the President hours before the axe fell on Sharif. She assured him that members of the National Assembly belonging to her Pakistan People's Party (PPP) were all ready to resign to lend credibility to the President's prepared charge that the National Assembly, following the mass resignation, is no longer valid.

In return, Bhutto had sought the rehabilitation of her husband, Asif Zardari, in prison under charges including kidnapping and extortion, and the dismissal of the provincial assemblies in order to ensure a free and fair election 90 days later. When the media asked why she had chosen to side with her onetime enemy, she replied that her decision was based on "principles."

After Ghulam Ishaq Khan sacked the Bhutto government on Aug. 6, 1990, she took to relentlessly chanting, "Go, Baba [Old Man], Go" in one public rally after another. In those days, she was not only upset with the President for bringing down her elected government, she had also accused him of rigging the November elections on behalf of Nawaz Sharif and his "instant political party," the IJI.

In the ensuing period, which saw yet another government thrown out 30

months later, a host of charges were filed against her and her husband, of which finally nothing came about. Nonetheless, because of the extreme harassment, she had no hesitation in pinning the blame on the "Baba."

Beginning in 1991 and throughout 1992, the PPP's bastion in Sindh had come under violent attack from its arch-enemy, the Mohajir Qaum Movement (MQM), a political grouping widely acknowledged as the handiwork of Gen. Zia ul-Haq to destroy the PPP in Sindh. Worse, the President appointed Jam Sadiq Ali, a former PPP leader from Sindh who had turned violently anti-PPP, as the caretaker chief minister of Sindh. Jam Sadiq, in close collaboration with the state's security chief (and Ishaq Khan's son-in-law) Irfan Marwat, was let loose on Bhutto and her party. The turmoil unleashed caused the death of hundreds of PPP activists and even the rape of a very close friend of Bhutto's, allegedly committed under the supervision of Marwat to send a message to Bhutto herself. Finally, the Army moved in and saved the PPP from a complete rout.

Surprisingly, Bhutto began to show interest in a dialogue with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif after the PPP had spearheaded the campaign to oust him in October 1992, which reached a high point with a "long march" to the capital on Nov. 18. Calling for an "honorable dialogue," Bhutto had lent support to the Sharif government proposal in the National Assembly for the repeal of the controversial Eighth Amendment to the 1973 Constitution. The amendment, dating from 1982

under the Zia ul-Haq regime, has been used thrice already to topple governments and dissolve the National Assembly. Bhutto later backed out from the proposed alliance, reportedly because the "Baba" himself had stood in the way of the rapprochement with Nawaz Sharif.

Now, having secured the necessary help from Bhutto, President Ghulam Ishaq Khan, after laundering Asif Zardari back into the honorable position of a junior minister in the caretaker cabinet, has shown no inclination to dissolve the provincial assemblies. In fact, by manipulating the ouster of the Sharif faction in the Punjab Provincial Assembly, Ghulam Ishaq Khan has sent the message that he wants to keep the provincial assemblies intact. Naturally, whenever the next elections are held, these provincial assembly members will return the President's favor by allowing him to rig on behalf of his favorites.

Bhutto has now reassessed her weak hand and has hastened to "renew her contacts" in Washington, which, in 1990, gave Ishaq Khan the nod to oust her and frame her up on all kinds of charges, including sedition. Bhutto is now urging the Clinton administration to talk to the President and help her to get back to power. As a signal, Bhutto, from Washington, has joined the U.S. State Department in praising the Pakistani Army for staying above politics recently and has urged the military to supervise the next elections.

Bhutto's "principles" have taken her far, no doubt. In 30 months, from the point of being incarcerated, she is now jockeying for power. And as far as the PPP goes, what dirty tricks by Zia ul-Haq, Ghulam Ishaq Khan, and others could not accomplish, Bhutto's "principles" are fast achieving. The PPP is becoming an empty shell dependent on the military and Washington.