

BENAZIR BHUTTO RETURNS HOME TO CHEERS AND BOMBS

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In November, 1999, I boarded a plane to Ladakh, India's province on the Western Tibetan plateau. I was going to visit as many Buddhist monasteries that I could during my break from sabbatical research in New Delhi.

As this was disputed territory between Pakistan and India, I should not have been surprised that one of the monasteries was only 70 miles from the highest battleground in the world.

The Boeing 737 was full of Indian military personnel and their families. I sat next to an air force captain whose job it was to helicopter supplies from Leh, Ladakh's capital at 12,000 feet, to the Siachen Glacier, 150 miles away with an average elevation of 19,000 feet.

In 1987 Pakistani commandos, trained by U.S. Special Forces and led by General Pervez Musharraf, launched a major attack, but it was repulsed by Indian troops. The last major conflict, again planned by Musharraf, occurred in May-July, 1999, and again the Indians, sometimes defending positions at 22,000 feet, were victorious with the Pakistanis suffering 4,000 fatalities.

Embarrassed by this disaster and shunned by the U.S., Pakistan's prime minister Nawaz Sharif was ousted in a military coup in which Musharraf took over the government and his rule is becoming more and more tenuous.

On September 10, 2007, Sharif, hoping to stand for parliamentary elections in January, 2008, attempted a return from exile in Saudi Arabia but he was turned back at the airport.

Then, on October 18, 2007, Benazir Bhutto, twice prime minister of Pakistan, returned to the capital Karachi to a tumultuous welcome that was marred by a double suicide bombing that killed 143 people. Bhutto escaped injury.

Bhutto charges that her opponents, among them Pakistani intelligence, were behind the attack, and she wondered aloud why the street lights went out just as her huge procession inched its way through the darkened streets.

Manzur Mughal, the man initially in charge of investigating the bombing, has now been forced to resign because Bhutto reminded authorities that Mughal was present when her husband was tortured in 1999.

Bhutto was educated at Harvard and Oxford and was the first Asian woman to be elected president of the prestigious Oxford Union. In 1988, at the age of 35, she led her Pakistan Peoples Party to victory and became the female prime minister of any Muslim country. Even though she is still under the pall of corruption charges, she is currently the second most popular politician in Pakistan after Nawaz Sharif.

U. S. government has brokered a deal between Musharraf, who would remain president, and Bhutto, who would be allowed to run as prime minister in the January elections. U.S. officials praise Bhutto for her opposition to militant Islam, and her statements that imply that she would welcome American military intervention in Northwest Pakistan. She has lost a lot of support among Pakistanis who think that she has sold out to both the Americans and to Musharraf, who has a 35 percent approval rating.

Attacks near the border with Afghanistan have tripled because the Taliban and Al Qaeda members have enjoyed safe haven in the lawless province of Waziristan, which now has the nickname Jihadistan. The militants have also found friends in Pakistan's southwest region, and the border town Chaman is a major jihadi headquarters immune from NATO attack.

Bolstered by \$10 billion in military and economic aid, Musharraf has been a very unreliable ally in the war on terror. Musharraf has captured some Al Qaeda leaders, but he stubbornly refuses to believe the consensus view that bin Laden is hiding in the Pakistani city of Quetta. When Bush boasts that he and Musharraf are "on the [terrorist] hunt together," he must have had his Vice President's advice about safe hunting partners.

It is not clear that Benazir Bhutto can survive what will undoubtedly be constant assassination attempts. She has received a letter from Al Qaeda that states that she will be "slaughtered like a goat."

Muslims in India, 155 million strong, have lived under a democratic government for 60 years, and a Muslim scientist has just finished a very successful term as India's president.

Let us hope that their Muslim brothers and sisters--Pakistan and Bangladesh were once part of British India--can enjoy their recent economic success in peace and security.

Nick Gier taught philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. Listen to or read his columns at www.NickGier.com.