



## Leading as a woman: The life and legacy of Benazir Bhutto

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On December 27, 2007, the world lost not just a political leader but a symbol of hope for millions of women across the globe. Benazir Bhutto was the first woman to lead a Muslim-majority country. Her leadership transformed the political landscape and deeply challenged long-standing gender roles for women in politics. Bhutto became a symbol of progress but left a complex legacy of unfulfilled promises and a reminder of the risks of challenging the powers that exist. Her life and legacy are that of courage and compromise, and her valiant efforts to advance democracy and gender equality in Pakistani society came at a deep personal cost. In her autobiography, she stated, "An arranged marriage was the price of personal choice I had to pay for the political path my life had taken." She also reflected, asking, "Was there a man in existence who could accept that my first commitment would always be to the people of Pakistan and not to him?"<sup>1</sup> Notably, Benazir's leadership was heavily influenced by the legacy of her family, which played a crucial role in the sacrifices she made throughout her political career. As explained in the BBC World Service Podcast, "Her family is to Pakistan what the Kennedys are to the US. The Bhutto name carries glamour and power."<sup>2</sup> This powerful legacy placed heavy expectations on Benazir and forced her to make sacrifices to achieve her political goals. These sacrifices, combined with her bold defiance of deeply rooted power structures, made her both a target and an icon. The assassination of Benazir Bhutto marked a turning point in Pakistan's political history, impacting both the role of women in politics and empowering future generations of Pakistani women to become leaders.

To fully comprehend the lasting impact Benazir has had on Pakistan, it is important to understand her family's political background. Her rise to power was influenced by generations of political leaders in her family. Her direct legacy begins with her father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, an Oxford-educated lawyer who was Prime Minister of Pakistan from 1971 to 1977. He was a popular leader who founded the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), a social democratic party, and he pushed for many reforms through his work. His vision was not favored by the military, and this eventually led to a military coup, imprisonment, and his execution in 1979. Benazir was placed under house arrest in 1977 by the same military coup leader, General Mohammad Zia ul-Haq, who was responsible for her father's execution. These early experiences heavily influenced young Benazir to push for a political career to reform the unfair legal system responsible for her father's death. Her determination was also fueled by her great sense of justice and her desire to continue her family's legacy of public service in a country burdened by political repression. According to one journalist, "Her father encouraged her to study other female leaders, including Indira Gandhi and Joan of Arc."<sup>3</sup> This showcases the formative role her father played in shaping her leadership ambitions. She started her journey at Harvard with a degree in comparative government and then attended Oxford, studying law and diplomacy. In 1987, she agreed to an arranged marriage with Asif Ali Zardari, who was a prominent

<sup>1</sup> Ayesha Jalal, *The Struggle for Pakistan: A Muslim Homeland and Global Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 260.

<sup>2</sup> BBC World Service. "Season N/A, Episode: The Prologue." December 18, 2017.  
<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-assassination/id1326104053>

<sup>3</sup> Hassan, Adeel. "Not Forgotten." *The New York Times* (New York City, NY), June 21, 2016.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/cp/obituaries/archives/benazir-bhutto>.



businessman from a landowning, influential family. This decision served as a political strategy that helped reassure traditional voters who viewed unmarried women in leadership roles unfavorably. After her marriage, she was elected as the 11th prime minister of Pakistan and the first female elected head of a Muslim-majority country. She served as prime minister twice, her first term being 1988-1990 and then again from 1993-1996. Her deeply personal entrance into politics made Benazir a symbol of determination and resistance. Her efforts to end martial law, restore democracy, and defend human rights through political reform stand as some of her greatest achievements, especially in a country dominated by military influence. Her bravery in returning from exile to re-enter Pakistani politics even in the face of grave personal threats was a powerful declaration of her resilience and commitment to the future of Pakistan. As one source notes, “She was a popular leader whom many viewed as key to a democratic Pakistan and to resisting the increasing power of fundamentalist groups and leaders there.”<sup>4</sup> This quote underscores Bhutto’s symbolic importance in Pakistan’s struggle for democracy. It was the strong support from the people that helped her become Prime Minister, and she began translating those ideals into action during her first term.

During Benazir’s two terms as Prime Minister, she introduced ambitious social reforms, championed women’s rights, and attempted to advance the economic and political landscape of Pakistan. After Bhutto’s first election, she took the lead in dismantling the oppressive aftermath of martial law. One of her major achievements was expanding access to healthcare and education, specifically for underserved communities. She appointed women to positions and government bodies, allowing them to participate in decision-making. This provided women with a voice in governance and encouraged them to be placed in these leadership positions. In addition to her progressive welfare programs, she also prioritized economic restructuring. As documented in an economic analysis, “The Pakistani government under Benazir Bhutto made efforts to implement structural reforms, including tax and trade reforms and reducing the state role in the economy. Under the caretaker government, efforts are being made to revitalize the structural reform program.”<sup>5</sup> Alongside her broader economic reforms, Benazir also introduced targeted initiatives aimed at addressing poverty and supporting low-income families. Despite her achievements during her first term, her government faced serious challenges such as economic difficulties, political opposition from conservative groups and the military, allegations of corruption, and eventually her dismissal in 1990 by President Ghulam Ishaq Khan on charges of inefficiency and corruption that were clouded by political bias. Sources say that her government was corrupt and that her political strategies were weak, but there is no evidence to back up those claims. Although her first term ended abruptly, Bhutto returned to office in 1993 with a clearer understanding of the political landscape and renewed determination. Her second term offered her opportunities to further improve upon the reforms she had previously set in motion, and it brought a fresh set of challenges. Bhutto began her second term developing good relations with her political opponents which demonstrated maturity to the citizens. This allowed her first year in power to be successful since there was little to no conflict from any other stakeholders. Although her efforts to have stable relationships deteriorated into hostility, with her

<sup>4</sup> Rodgers, Melissa, and Cheryl Lindsey Seelhoff. “PAKISTAN: Benazir Bhutto Assassinated.” *Off Our Backs* 37, no.4 (2007) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20838851>

<sup>5</sup> Pakistan: Economic Policy and Trade Practices Report, H.R. No INT (Cal. ). [https://1997-2001.state.gov/issues/economic/trade\\_reports/south\\_asia96/pakistan96.html#:~:text=The%20Pakistani%20government%20under%20Benazir,revitalize%20the%20structural%20reform%20program.](https://1997-2001.state.gov/issues/economic/trade_reports/south_asia96/pakistan96.html#:~:text=The%20Pakistani%20government%20under%20Benazir,revitalize%20the%20structural%20reform%20program.)

main rival, Nawaz Sharif. Now that she had faced oppression from other parties she began the same political tactics she had done during her first term; such as using the judiciary to target political opponents, resorting to political victimization, and silencing opposition voices with arrests and intimidation.<sup>6</sup> These actions that she employed led to widespread criticism and led to a decline in public support which minimized her ability to carry out the goals she had for this society. Her second dismissal in 1996 showcased the instability of democratic institutions in Pakistan, the persistent influence of the military, and entrenched power structures in civilian governance. Despite these setbacks, Bhutto's commitment to politics was notably prominent. Her return from exile placed her in danger, ultimately leading to the tragic events around her assassination.

Benazir's assassination story was a complicated one full of intrigue, multiple assassination attempts, and nationwide riots and protests. The assassination itself was a pivotal moment in Pakistan's history underscoring the challenges of being a woman in power while also being an outspoken critic of extremism and military dominance. In many interviews leading up to her assassination, Bhutto discussed the risks she took by coming back to Pakistan and very openly declared that if she were to be murdered it would be "an act of God."<sup>7</sup> Benazir survived her first attack, and went on to present a speech. She announced, "It was no secret that the terrorists would attempt to assassinate me," she thundered. "So, all those who walked with us knew that it carried a risk. And still they did so, because they want a Pakistan that is democratic. They want a Pakistan that can provide hope and a better future for those who are hungry. For those who are poor. For those who are downtrodden."<sup>8</sup> Benazir was aware of the dangers of being in power and yet she continued to have open opinions, and speak her mind. On December 27, 2007, as Benazir stood through her car's sunroof to wave at the crowd of citizens at her rally of supporters in Rawalpindi a suicide bomb exploded. Based on the United Nations Commission Inquiry, this event was "chaotic and badly secured."<sup>9</sup> The event impacted many others during the attack. "Those two attacks on Benazir Bhutto killed nearly 200 people. Some were guards and police. Others, supporters who had gone out to cheer her on and never got home. And of course, one of those killed was Benazir herself. But some people, people with connections to the attack, have also been killed."<sup>10</sup> There were reports of yet more deaths of people connected to the assassination attempt after the fact and the resultant investigation was no less controversial. Benazir's brave decision to return from exile showed her optimism in the country's future and gave people hope. But it was this return that ultimately led to her assassination and clearly showed her supporters and the world that her progressive vision was a threat to the extremist ideology being popularized in the country.

The investigation into the assassination was marred by negligence and outright incompetence. There were questions about government complicity and the security apparatus' failure to protect her. The entire situation strongly put to the forefront the instability and lack of transparency in Pakistan's judicial system. Important aspects of the investigation were

<sup>6</sup> Khan, Taj Moharram, Bakhtiar Khan, and Saeed Ahmad. "Government-opposition Relations at Centre and Provinces: Analysing Second Term of Benazir Bhutto Government." *The Dialogue* 13 (January 2018).  
[https://www.qurtuba.edu.pk/thedialogue/The%20Dialogue/1\\_1\\_2018/09%20119-136%20Taj%20Muharram.pdf](https://www.qurtuba.edu.pk/thedialogue/The%20Dialogue/1_1_2018/09%20119-136%20Taj%20Muharram.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Bhutto, Benazir. *Benazir Bhutto Daughter of the East*. London, UK: Simon & Schuster, 1989

<sup>8</sup> Bennet - Jones, Owen. *The Bhutto Dynasty*. 2020 ed. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020. Digital file. (220)

<sup>9</sup> Munoz, Heraldo. Report of the United Nations Commission of Inquiry into the Facts and Circumstances of the Assassination of Former Pakistani Prime Minister Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto, April 15, 2010.

<https://www.refworld.org/reference/factfinding/unsecgen/2010/en/76590>

<sup>10</sup> BBC World Service, 2017

mishandled, even the site of her assassination was hosed down and wiped clean before any evidence could be collected.<sup>11</sup> Despite Ms. Bhutto's repeated requests for VVIP security, the government, led by President Pervez Musharraf, refused to grant her the same level of protection given to previous prime ministers. The UN launched an investigation of their own in 2010 that found the government at the time had failed to protect her and had mismanaged the investigation into her death.<sup>12</sup> Benazir was failed by many people that were meant to look out for her and protect her. The police reports after her assassination were spacious and left out key details of this tragedy. "Another major gap in the police report concerned the physical appearance of the suspects."<sup>13</sup> These and other unresolved questions damaged public trust and led many to question the integrity of the political and judicial system in Pakistan. The impact was felt well into the next general elections cycle in 2008 where her assassination caused delays and concerns were raised about electoral fairness.

Benazir's assassination triggered global reactions and sparked an outpouring of grief. The media presented Benazir in an idealized manner that ignored the complexity of her life and legacy, including her religious identity, and the imperfections that made her both influential and controversial. The global feminist movement responded with solidarity, organizing vigils, public tributes, and campaigns that honored her as someone who broke barriers for women in politics and leadership. Her representation in the media was described in contrasting ways, one magazine states, "From the moment she appeared on the international scene, she was destined to be an icon. To the West, Benazir Bhutto, the first democratically-elected woman to lead a Muslim nation, looked like a Disney drawing of a beautiful fairytale princess from an animated fable set somewhere in the mysterious Orient."<sup>14</sup> This quote reflects the Western tendency to view powerful women from non-Western countries in romanticized ways, which detract from their actual struggles and impacts. This idealization shapes how Benazir was seen globally and how her image was caricatured to fit global accounts about women in leadership.

As the first female prime minister of Pakistan, Benazir had a transformational impact on women's political participation in Pakistan and across the world. She was seen as a symbol of what was possible for women in deeply patriarchal societies, and her assassination left a huge void. A commentator, Adele M. Stan claims, "To the West at large, she spoke the language of secular democracy. To American women, Bhutto spoke the language of feminism."<sup>15</sup> This suggests that Benazir's actions, leadership, and public image conveyed ideas, values, and expressions central to the feminist movement in a way that resonated with women. Her influence challenged many political and cultural norms within Pakistan and abroad, such as being the first woman to lead Pakistan, advocating for women's education, and openly confronting military dominance and religious extremism. "In Beijing, at the 1999 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, Bhutto advocated for the empowerment of women through education, employment, and population control. She railed against female infanticide

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<sup>11</sup> Munoz, Heraldo. Report of the United Nations Commission of Inquiry into the Facts and Circumstances of the Assassination of Former Pakistani Prime Minister Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto, April 15, 2010. <https://www.refworld.org/reference/factfinding/unsecgen/2010/en/76590>

<sup>12</sup> UN *women*. [https://pakistan.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/summary\\_-nrsw-inl\\_final.pdf](https://pakistan.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/summary_-nrsw-inl_final.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> Bennet-Jones, 2020 (222)

<sup>14</sup> Stan, 2007

<sup>15</sup> Stan, Adele M. "Benazir Bhutto: An Imperfect Feminist" *The American Prospect* (Washington, DC), December 31, 2007. <https://prospect.org/article/benazir-bhutto-imperfect-feminist/>

and misogynist interpretations of Islam.”<sup>16</sup> This highlights Bhutto’s challenge to interpretations of Islam that have been historically used to justify gender inequality. Bhutto’s criticism was not of the religion itself, but of the way that male-dominated organizations used religion to control women’s bodies, exclude them from political and economic life, and limit their access to education. Bhutto’s voice carried significant influence because it came from within the Muslim community, directly confronting the misleading ideas. In Benazir Bhutto’s autobiography *Daughter of the East*, she is observant of the sexism that women have had to face, particularly relating to Islam, and how people view the religion. She highlights how society has distorted religious teachings to suppress women’s rights and maintain patriarchal control. “On television, female newscasters were required to cover their heads with *dupattas*, and those that refused were dismissed. The athletes on Pakistan’s women’s hockey teams were required to keep their legs covered on the field, effectively eliminating them from taking part in international competitions.”<sup>17</sup> Benazir’s observations reflect her character, and how others interpret religion has impacted Islamic women in negative ways and has served to regulate women’s presence and bodies.

Bhutto’s legacy persists as a powerful symbol of feminism, female leadership, and a vision for reform in Muslim societies. Her assassination reshaped the political landscape, especially allowing women to become more vocal and changing their role in politics. Women started rallies and movements in her name to continue the work she started. It was more than just a political tragedy, it was a major moment that reshaped Pakistan’s identity and renewed global conversation about women in leadership. “Her legacy and significance in world history continue to hold a special place in the hearts of millions of Pakistanis who mourn her death as much as they mourn the death of the dream of what Pakistan might have been had she lived to rule the country just one more time.”<sup>18</sup> This quote reflects grief not only for a significant figure but for a possibility. This quote captures the symbolic impact and tragic timing of her death. Many admirable women have viewed Benazir as a role model and have carried on her legacy. An article claims, “Many of these girls regard Benazir Bhutto as an inspiration for their own educational paths. Malala Yousafzai, Pakistan’s most famous schoolgirl, cites Ms. Bhutto as her personal idol, and wore Ms. Bhutto’s white shawl when she addressed the United Nations in 2013.”<sup>19</sup> Her legacy of empowering women in education is continued, as one paper reports “Young women attend classes at the Shaheed Zulfikar Ali Bhutto Institute of Science and Technology, which Ms. Bhutto established in her father’s name, in Karachi, Islamabad, Hyderabad and Larkana.”<sup>20</sup> Her death became a pivotal moment that stimulated a new generation of women who followed Benazir’s leadership and continued to fight for equality in Pakistan.

The life and tragic death of Benazir Bhutto left a great impact on Pakistan’s political and social landscape, sparking more discussion around democracy, gender, and leadership. As the first woman leader of Pakistan, Bhutto’s leadership was an achievement that challenged strong patriarchal norms. Her time in power was challenging and controversial and she was forced to make many sacrifices for her political image yet she still put her efforts towards empowering

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<sup>16</sup> Stan, 2007

<sup>17</sup> Bhutto, Benazir. *Benazir Bhutto Daughter of the East*. London, UK: Simon & Schuster, 1989

<sup>18</sup> Shah, Bina. “The Legacy of Benazir Bhutto.” *New York Times* (New York City, NY), December 27, 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/27/opinion/the-legacy-of-benazir-bhutto.html>

<sup>19</sup> Shah, Bina, 2014

<sup>20</sup> Shah, Bina, 2014





women, promoting democratic values, and advocating for human rights. Benazir's legacy remains a beacon of inspiration for citizens in Pakistan and provides hope to generations of leaders committed to shaping the future. Her assassination wasn't just the loss of a prominent political figure, it was also the loss of a symbol of hope for millions who viewed her as a change agent. Her legacy lives on through the people that she inspired along her journey as well as her children who are either in politics or active in philanthropy. She proved that her courage and intellect could break even the most firmly entrenched barriers, a story of hope for future generations to carry forward. In conclusion, Benazir Bhutto's journey demonstrates that a woman could rise to the pinnacle of power through her resilience and hard work but the entrenched societal and political forces will make her road extraordinarily difficult and will require many sacrifices. In Bhutto's case, it ended up in the ultimate sacrifice - her death by assassination. Understanding Benazir's life and death matters because she left a great impact on communities in Pakistan and abroad. Her challenges and achievements demonstrate her imperfections, and her determination to form a thriving society. In a time when women in power face heavy obstacles, Bhutto's life remains a symbol of hope, power, and perseverance.

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