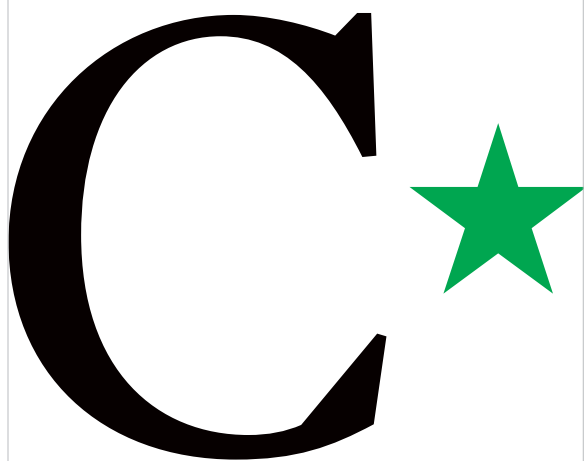


THE  
EXILE'S  
RETURN

BEFORE HER HISTORIC HOMECOMING,  
**BENAZIR BHUTTO**, THE FIRST WOMAN  
TO HEAD A MODERN MUSLIM STATE, SPOKE WITH  
**AMY WILENTZ** ABOUT WHY SHE HAS BEEN  
WILLING TO RISK DEPORTATION, ARREST AND  
EVEN ASSASSINATION TO GET BACK TO PAKISTAN

Illustration by CHANG PARK





Caesar is barking in the courtyard. When I pass him, he pulls at his chain, trying to reach me, and not for a pat on the head. He's not a big dog, but he's fierce and muscular, with a mouth full of long, sharp teeth. Caesar is Benazir Bhutto's dog. He's snarling in the background as I proceed on an afternoon in early September to the front door of one of Bhutto's houses, this one in a Middle Eastern country that she has asked me not to identify.

Caesar, it occurs to me, is a richly ironic name for the pet of someone who considers herself a freedom fighter and democracy advocate. But then, Bhutto's pets have run the gamut of appellations, and it is perhaps unwise to come to conclusions, ironic or not, based on what she chooses to name them. When she was a fiery opposition leader in Pakistan in 1986, two years before she was first elected prime minister, her cat was called Sugar.

"Be sure to take Sugar to the vet."

Those are the last words Bhutto is reported to have spoken to her staff back then, as she was whisked off to jail in a police car, and not for the first time.

When I get past Caesar and into the house, Bhutto is in one of the broad downstairs receiving rooms giving a formal interview to reporters from Al Arabiya television. I can hear her cultured voice going on in English about the need for democratic government in Pakistan and about the problems of the country's increasingly active Islamic fundamentalist enclaves. (Extremist militias now control much of Pakistan's 1,500-mile border with Afghanistan.)

After nearly nine years of self-imposed exile, Bhutto is making plans to go home. At presstime, she had set a date of October 18. Because long-standing corruption charges against her may end up being dropped, she will probably not risk another arrest or deportation upon arrival. Indeed, she may well be allowed to run for prime minister, an office from which she was twice ousted on a variety of charges (all of which she maintains were politically motivated and false). Technically, she is not eligible to serve a third term as premier, but that prohibition may be

soon be lifted with the approval of Pakistan's current president, General Pervez Musharraf.

Bhutto, who is the chairwoman of the prominent Pakistan Peoples Party, is seizing on a very low moment in Musharraf's popularity to bargain with him. His long alliance with George Bush, his failed attempt at firing Pakistan's popular supreme court chief justice last March and his authorization of a raid last July on an Islamabad mosque, which killed 100 people, all weigh heavily in her favor. An independent poll conducted in late August showed Musharraf with only a 38 percent approval rating, George Bush with nine percent—and Osama bin Laden with 46 percent. Bhutto held a 63 percent approval rating, however. She hopes to use that advantage to restore democracy in her country with herself at the helm, and then convince the Pakistani people that America's antiterrorism agenda is preferable to the al-Qaeda alternative.

When I wonder out loud to her about the dangers of returning to Pakistan and about what could possibly motivate her, she tells me, "In the last election, my party took the largest number of votes,

FROM LEFT  
Bhutto, at 19, at  
an historic India-  
Pakistan summit.  
Bhutto's brothers,  
Shahnawaz (in  
turtleneck) and Mir  
(with mustache),  
leading a 1979  
protest of General  
Zia's decision to  
execute their  
father, Zulfikar Ali  
Bhutto, 1972.



despite all the mudslinging that has taken place. I feel I owe a debt to the people to go back." She mentions too that it's not just her role in Pakistan she misses, but the country itself. "I miss the scent of the rain when it falls on the dusty roads," she says. "And the wheat crops in flower. I miss the people; I miss all of our rituals—visiting the graves of our forefathers." Clearly one of the national rituals Bhutto also pines for is the ritual of the push and pull, the high-stakes dealmaking that constitutes Pakistani politics.

Caesar is a better pet for Bhutto than Sugar right now. During her 20-year political career, she has been a victim of several assassination attempts; even outside Pakistan she is wise to take precautions. She lives now with her younger daughter, Aseefa, in the house Caesar guards; her son and older daughter are off at university. Her husband, Asif Ali Zardari



(from whom Bhutto is reportedly estranged), lives with *his* dog, Maximilian, in New York. Today, her household is in flux, with furniture moved here and there to accommodate the television crew and sofas turning up in strange places, like the foot of the stairs. But a life spent in Pakistani politics has accustomed Benazir Bhutto to chaos and disarray. She thrives on it.



In the front sitting room, where I'm waiting for Bhutto, is a little library with shelves of books labeled by category: not just BIOGRAPHIES, FICTION, SPEECHES, RELIGION and SOUTH ASIA but also COOKING BOOKS, YOGA, SELF-HELP, HEALTH and ASTROLOGY. I see one section called FAMILY. Based on the quantity of self-help and health titles—such as *Facial Workout*, *The Little Book of Stress* and *Eat to Beat Your Age*—I expect the family shelves to include books on how to listen to your kids so your kids will talk to you. Instead I discover that the 60 to 70 volumes there are either about the Bhutto family or include chapters



about a member of the family, most often her father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, a progressive, democratically elected prime minister who was ousted, imprisoned and hanged in 1979 by General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, one of the presidents who preceded Musharraf. Open on a small table next to the bookcases is *How to Know God: The Soul's Journey into the Mystery of Mysteries*, by Deepak Chopra.

I knew Benazir Bhutto slightly when she and I were at Harvard together in the early 1970s. I met her through her younger brother, Mir, my friend and classmate. This is not exactly the library—especially the *public* library—I would have expected of a graduate of Harvard and Oxford University who was elected president of the prestigious Oxford Union debating society back in 1977. I would have expected Shakespeare, John Stuart Mill, Milton, Carlyle and Disraeli perhaps, and possibly Trollope or Dickens.

Maybe V. S. Naipaul and Pakistani novelists like Mohsin Hamid and Hanif Kureishi. But then, when she is not in her role as a former and possibly future world leader, Benazir is surprisingly unpretentious.

Perhaps this is because during her life, she has been not only celebrated but also humbled, as a central actor in a family saga that seems sometimes like a Greek tragedy—with zeniths of political power and nadirs of violent death—and at other moments like a lowbrow soap opera.

I remember visiting Benazir with Mir back in college, at Eliot House, a big brick dormitory next to the Charles River. Her room was splashed with bright, mirrored fabric and bedspreads made in Pakistan. Her nickname, given to her by her father, was Pinkie, because of her fair skin. Mir was a little awed by his big sister, but they had an easy, teasing relationship. The writer Anne Fadiman, who roomed next door to Benazir then, later noted that when Bhutto arrived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a prodigy at the age of 16, “She had never cooked a meal, washed a blouse, walked more than a block without being picked up by

Of herself in college, Bhutto tells me, “I give thanks to God that I was in the U.S. in those hippie days and we were all so informal. I learned to look after myself. I came from so privileged a background; there, I became self-sufficient. In the face of what later happened, I would have crumbled otherwise.”



a chauffeur or lifted a ringing telephone.” She had been raised like an Indian princess during the Raj, surrounded by lackeys and ayahs.

Of herself at that time, Bhutto told me later, “I have lived a life of contrasts, and I give thanks to God that I was in the U.S. in those hippie days and we were all so informal. I learned to look after myself. I could go to

airports and pick up my own luggage and make my own bed. I came from so privileged a background; there, I became self-sufficient. In the face of what later happened to me, I would have crumbled otherwise.” →

One of the things that happened to her was General Zia, the man who orchestratedd the 1986 arrest during which she had to leave her cat Sugar behind, the same tin-pot, mustachioed dictator who had ordered the execution of her father. After Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was hanged, Benazir, then 26 years old, took up the reins of his political organization and became an important opposition figure during those turbulent days.

General Zia sensed her potential immediately; Muslim South Asia is a place where dynastic power is still considered natural, even if the inheritor of the mantle turns out to be a young woman. As soon as her father was imprisoned, Zia placed Benazir under house arrest. He liked arresting her, it turned out. It became a habit. In 1981, he had her jailed on the invented suspicion that she and a group run by Mir had participated in the hijacking of a Pakistan International Airlines plane. All told, Zia kept Benazir in jail, under house arrest or in exile for eight years.



Benazir's younger brother, Shahnawaz Bhutto, was poisoned on the French Riviera in 1985. Although his murder was never solved, many believe it was masterminded by Zia. Three years later, in one of the Bhutto story's hairpin turns of fate, Zia himself died when his jet crashed under mysterious circumstances, killing all 31 people on board, including the American ambassador to Pakistan, Arnold Raphel. (An under-ground group run by Mir Bhutto was suspected in the crash.)

Four months after Zia died, Benazir Bhutto was elected prime minister of Pakistan at the age of 35, the first woman to lead an Islamic country in modern history.

"In 1987 and 1988, within 12 months, she got married, wrote a book, built a house, had a baby, ran a nationwide election campaign and took her first job: as prime minister of a country of a hundred million people. Not bad," says Peter Galbraith, author of *The End of Iraq* and a Harvard and Oxford classmate of Bhutto's.

Bhutto never doubted that a woman could be elected in Pakistan. "I thought it was the most natural thing in the world," she says. "My father never made a discrimination between the girls and the boys in the family. He never said, 'Because you're a girl, you're not going to be considered the eldest.' I sat at the head of the table because I was the eldest. I thought it was the same all over Pakistan. It was a big shock when I found out it wasn't so."

In the end, though, her gender was not the important liability. The structure of Pakistan's government has been part of the problem: The president has the right to dismiss the premier. What this has meant is that political or military pressure exerted on the president can and frequently does result in the dismissal of a prime minister.

And there is also the matter of Bhutto's character. She is, as she titled her 1989 autobiography, a "daughter of destiny," the inheritor of her father's legacy. Her beloved papa was not only a visionary

Bhutto's younger daughter, Aseefa Zardari, 14, flounces in from school, throws herself onto the sofa and lolls there. "They are threatening to send me back to Pakistan if my grades don't get better," she says.



leader, an avatar of progressive political ideals in South Asia and a hypnotic and eloquent orator, but he was also a legendary scrapper, an inveterate wheeler-dealer and a cobbler of baroque, smoke-filled back room arrangements.

While her father was in Pakistan, pushing to reform the constitution and to consolidate his political power, Benazir was in graduate school, studying politics, philosophy and economics, and doing—in miniature—political gymnastics similar to his in order to become president of the Oxford Union. After one of her Oxford Union campaigns, detractors said she had violated campaign rules. Whatever the truth, it was early evidence of her hardheaded determination. When she wanted something—no matter the odds, no matter the ethics—she would work very hard to get it.

In 1987, she entered a fateful alliance. Her mother, Begum Nusrat Bhutto, arranged her marriage to Zardari, a good-looking playboy from a wealthy

merchant family in Sindh, Bhutto's home province. "[Benazir] was running for president and she felt she couldn't really run as a single woman in a Muslim country, so she quite deliberately had her mother find her a suitable husband," said one observer. "She would have been better off marrying for love."

Soon after his wife became prime minister, Zardari allegedly became involved in schemes to skim money from the national coffers. In the Pakistani press, he was known as Mr. Ten Percent for the amount he reportedly demanded from contractors seeking business with the government. Also, during Bhutto's second administration, Zardari was accused of masterminding the death of Benazir's brother Mir, who was gunned down by Pakistani police outside the family house at 70 Clifton Road in Karachi. At the time, Mir had been attempting, weakly but insistently, to chip away at his sister's power base within the Pakistan Peoples Party. None



FROM FAR LEFT Bhutto's 1987 wedding to wealthy playboy Zardari. In Karachi in 1999, with her son and older daughter wearing T-shirts featuring their mother and grandfather. Bhutto supporters in Lahore, demonstrating against President Musharraf's dismissal of the chief justice last May.

of the officers who participated in his assassination was ever arrested. In fact, some were even promoted. After Bhutto was ousted as prime minister for the second time, Zardari served more than seven years in prison on charges of corruption and of involvement in his brother-in-law's murder, although none of the charges against him were ever proved.

Like her father, Bhutto has several times risked safety and freedom for the people of Pakistan; so far, all her striving has meant little improvement in their daily lives. (Bhutto herself points out that two or three Pakistanis commit suicide every day because they cannot feed their families.) Her detractors insist that her corrupt administration has gotten in the way of her loftier goals. According to a 1998 story by John Burns in the *New York Times*, Pakistani investigators discovered a pattern of illegal payments by foreign companies seeking contracts with Pakistan when Bhutto was in office. They traced more than \$100 million from such payments deposited in foreign bank accounts controlled by Bhutto's family

or by her husband or his family. A Swiss court found against Zardari and Bhutto in 2003. She is appealing that conviction.

Bhutto remembers well the *Times* article that outlined the charges against her and her husband, and all the stories that followed. "None of it was true," she tells me later. "These things would come on the television, and I would be so ashamed in front of my family and my staff. The worst thing is to have your character attacked. If they assassinate your physical being, you're just dead. But character assassination is the killing of your personality and your reputation."

She feels the decline in her international reputation keenly. "Look," says Irfan Khawaja, a doctoral candidate at the University of Notre Dame who frequently writes about Pakistani politics, "she has never fully vindicated herself. Of course she's not guilty for things her husband may have done, but to claim she didn't know what he was doing is absurd. There is a cloud over her head wherever she goes."

As she sits calmly in her suburban living room, talking quietly in front of the Al Arabiya cameras, it's hard to remember her earlier, triumphant return to Pakistan in 1986, just before Zia had her arrested, but I happen to have recently looked at a photograph from that day. She is in a motorcade. It's a bright sunny day in Lahore. She's wearing a sari and shawls, a head covering and sunglasses. Almost a million Pakistanis have come out to greet her. Rose petals are flung at her like confetti. She's waving from the car—her face turned down slightly to avoid the shower of petals—and she's smiling broadly.



While I'm sitting in the little library area, Bhutto's younger daughter, Aseefa Zardari, 14, flounces in from school and throws herself onto the sofa that is sitting improbably near the bottom of a spiral staircase. Aseefa lolls there with a notebook in hand; she's a tall girl, an imposing figure, with thick straight, black hair; dramatic eyebrows; a quick, ironic smile and intelligent eyes. She adores rap music, according to her mother, and—also according to her mother—spends too much of her time online in rap chat rooms. Today, Aseefa is wearing a black-and-white teenager's getup that looks vaguely rapper style; on one of her fingers is a huge, flashy ring that covers two knuckles.

"Real?" asks Narmeen, a childhood friend of Benazir's who is like an aunt to Aseefa. Narmeen points to the ring.

Aseefa rolls her expressive eyes.

"No, it's fake, of course," she says. "I only get *real* if I get A's." She listens

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as her mother's voice continues on in the other room. Bhutto was late for her television interview because she'd been called into school to discuss Aseefa's grades.

"Now look!" Aseefa complains, shaking her head. "I can't even get up to my bedroom to begin to study because of her." The stairway is in the view of the Al Arabiya cameras. "The school took me aside to say there must be no distractions at home, and now they won't even let me upstairs." Aseefa throws herself back down across the couch. She finds the whole situation funny and is playing it for Narmeen and me. "They are threatening to send me back to Pakistan if my grades don't get better," she tells Narmeen. "Both of them: Mummy and Papa."

Does Aseefa want to go back to Pakistan?

"Are you kidding?"

She asks me for help writing her application to Barnard College, in New York. She wants to major in English literature.

"For my essay, maybe I should write about today," she says, gesturing to the room where the interview is still going on.

Later, when the Al Arabiya crew has finally gone, Bhutto settles into a corner of a couch in a back sitting room. She crosses her legs.

She's very different from the tall, slender girl I first knew. First of all, she's not wearing jeans and a T-shirt. I point this out. "Well, I am not a teenager any longer, you know," she says, laughing. She is wearing an elegant black *shalwar kamiz*—a long tunic over matching loose trousers. She's got on sensible heels. Around the neckline of the tunic is draped an airy beige chiffon scarf that she can easily shift to cover her head if necessary. Her eye shadow is blue, and her earrings the bright, deep gold one sees especially in the Muslim world, probably 24 karat.

"I find 50 liberating," she says. "I was always so careful being young.

"Some of my friends think I'm mad to be going back," Bhutto says. "Even my relatives, because they don't want to lose me. They've seen what happened to my brothers and my father. They keep telling me, 'Think again!' But it's my country."

I didn't want to send the wrong signals. I wrapped myself in all these layers of clothing to protect myself. Now that I'm fat and 50, I'm a mother figure. I find that aspect of aging liberating; there's no danger of people misunderstanding you." Of course, she's not fat, even if she's no longer a slender wraith. And she's still seductive. Of course, she's also not exactly 50. I point this out. She laughs. She's 54.

Narmeen sits with us while we talk; every once in a while Bhutto turns to her for confirmation, or to have Narmeen remind her of a name, or to ask her to deal with some small household problem. In this well-appointed house in a nice neighborhood, where—with the help of trusted staff and childhood friends—Bhutto leads the life of a mother and adult daughter (she takes care of her 78-year-old mother, who suffers from Alzheimer's disease), one does wonder again why she would choose to thrust herself back into the turmoil of political leadership in Pakistan.

"Some of my friends think I'm mad to be going back," she says. "Even my relatives, because they don't want to lose me. They've seen what happened to my brothers and my father. They keep telling me, 'Think again!' But it's my country."

It's not easy, though, for a person of Bhutto's stature to go back to Pakistan. She can't just buy a plane

ticket. To get back into the country, she's had to make arrangements with Musharraf, even though, for solid political reasons, she doesn't want to be seen as propping up a military dictator.

"I'm not making *deals* with the military," she says. "I'm having a *dialogue* with them about how we can get a transition to democracy. Look, the military is one aspect of Pakistan; the people are another aspect of Pakistan. So, yes, I'm talking to the military about how we can move into the future with a political system that can guarantee the security of the country *and* bring the people of Pakistan into the country's decision-making."

Still, Bhutto may find herself astride a beast she can't control: For so long, the Pakistani army has done what it feels necessary, often without consulting the civilian government. Already the deal she struck with Musharraf is showing signs of falling apart. "Here are the people, struggling against Musharraf, and here she comes, thinking she'll be able to prevail and take charge of the military," says Khawaja. "She's being taken for a ride. What is she going to do when she's there and suddenly the army starts arresting people? How will she be able to intervene?"

I ask Bhutto whether she thinks about what would happen to her children if harm should come to her now.

"I block out such thoughts," she says, but her face registers distress. "When the time comes that I have to die, I'll die. There's a day that you're born and a day when you're supposed to die. I could die crossing the street—especially in Pakistan." She laughs. Pakistani drivers are notoriously unsafe. "So that's that."

As we talk, staffers come in to attend to me and Bhutto. Do we want tea? Diet Coke? Here is some fruit on a platter. Do we want cookies? Here comes a tray of tiny elephant-ear pastries and pink candies. One of her assistants brings me a copy of Bhutto's autobiography. →

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Another brings Bhutto her cell phone. It's her lawyer calling. She chats with him in Urdu, then turns to me. "I hope for your sake you never have to deal with lawyers," she says. While we are talking, all over the world, lawyers are fighting her corruption cases; and in Pakistan, lawyers and judges are reconsidering the charges against her and her desire to run for prime minister again. So much of Bhutto's future is in the hands of lawyers and judges.

Among her fiercest detractors are members of her own family. This is not a singular phenomenon among Pakistan's political class, in which sons regularly abandon fathers, mothers publicly reject daughters, and brothers attack brothers. Particularly adamant is her 25-year-old niece, Fatima Bhutto—daughter of the murdered Mir. Fatima, a published poet and journalist who graduated from Columbia University and the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies, lives in the Bhutto family home at 70 Clifton, in Karachi, with her mother, Ghinwa Bhutto, Mir's widow. Part of the fight within the family in recent years has been over the ownership of that house.

"I feel so sad that Fatima doesn't have anything to do with us," says Benazir, her eyes downcast. "She's a sweet girl, she's very nice and everybody says she's just like me."

"I'm amused that she's 'saddened' that I do not talk to her," Fatima tells me in an e-mail. (Fatima is known in Pakistan for her barbed irony.) "I have regular contact with my aunt through the courts of Pakistan, where she has filed a number of cases—[involving] property, inheritance, custody—against my family and me. I have been on the other side of Benazir's vindictive, litigious streak since I was 14—for 11 years. I think that's plenty of contact.

"Also, just for the record—I am *nothing* like Benazir," Fatima writes. "I cannot emphasize that enough. People just seize upon the facts that

we're both women and that both our fathers were killed. The similarities end there. I promise."

Benazir seems resigned to the estrangement. "Anyhow," she says, adopting a wistful tone, "I still send them love and prayers, because I think that's the important thing to do. Send love and prayers and hope that one day, their eyes will open."



When a person has been living in exile for a long time, she can forget where her possessions are located—especially if she is lucky enough to be the sort of refugee who has a lot of stuff. When Bhutto left Pakistan in 1999, she fled in a hurry. "I took one suitcase to America," she recalls. She left more than one house full of belongings in Pakistan: There is the family residence in Lahore, another family manse in Larkana, one in Islamabad, and also Bilawal House, where she and Zardari lived in Karachi. Bhutto also has houses outside of Pakistan, filled with more things: an apartment in London, a house in Dubai, Zardari's New York apartment, and other houses—in France and in England—that the Zardaris own. (Bhutto and Zardari are estimated to be worth more than \$400 million, much of it inherited, part of it without such clear provenance.)

But Bhutto has been thinking mostly about campaign routes, not

**I feel, as I'm leaving, that perhaps Bhutto's life—for all the staff and assistants—is a little lonely. Her father is dead, her mother is ill, her brothers are dead, her husband is a liability, and two of her children are in college. She asks if I can stay for dinner but I have a plane to catch.**

about what to pack—except how many books to bring.

"Am I going to be arrested?" she says. "If so, I will need a lot of books to read."

If she is not deported or arrested, she will go back to live in Bilawal House, which was broken into during the years she was away. "We don't know what things will be like there," she says.

She'll be returning to Pakistan without her immediate family (unless she makes good on her threats to Aseefa, which is unlikely). She and her husband have not lived together for 10 years. "He's not well," she says. "He's had heart problems; he's got diabetes." Also, of course, the threat of further imprisonment for Zardari could be used to tie her hands politically.

She's reading a novel now about Catherine de' Medici. "It's amazing how everyone around her died," she says. "How she must have suffered! But life is full of suffering. It's the moments in between that count: your kid getting into college, your husband surprising you with a gift. I just hope life will continue with its hurly-burly."

"Hurly-burly" should certainly be on the list of things Bhutto can expect upon her return to Pakistan.

But I feel, as I'm leaving, that perhaps Bhutto's life—for all the staff and assistants—is a little lonely. She has spent the past decade flying around the world, keeping her name alive and, essentially, plotting her return. Her father is dead, her mother is ill, her brothers are dead, her husband is a liability, and two of her children are already in college.

She asks me whether I can stay for dinner, but I have a plane to catch. As we walk out to my waiting car, it's quiet except for the hum of traffic on a not-too-distant highway. Narmeen has gone to check on Aseefa, ostensibly studying in her room upstairs. My car pulls away, and I see Bhutto's imposing figure in her shalwar kamiz, silhouetted by the yellow light in her doorway. She gives me a little wave, and I think to myself, soon she'll be waving to millions. **M**