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NEWS ANALYSIS

Bhutto's Return Brings Pakistani Politics to a Boil

By [CARLOTTA GALL](#)

ISLAMABAD, [Pakistan](#), Oct. 29 — Home for just over a week, the opposition leader [Benazir Bhutto](#) has raised the temperature in Pakistan a hundredfold, stirring friend and foe alike as she rallies supporters, courts the news media and plunges back into the muck of Pakistan's politics.

Her arrival procession on Oct. 18 demonstrated the strength of her Pakistan Peoples Party, as did the quarter of a million loyal and enthusiastic supporters who went to Karachi to greet her. But the bomb blasts, which killed 140 of them, showed her enemies to be equally fervent.

Since then, the charges and counter-charges hurled in both directions have shown that Ms. Bhutto — daughter of a famous politician executed by the military, twice prime minister before, and an exile for eight years to avoid corruption cases — “remains an intensely polarizing figure,” as Shafqat Mahmood, a former member of Parliament and a columnist, put it.

“The passion of Pakistan Peoples Party supporters, so visible in the crowd on that fateful day, saw the father and daughter reach highest offices in the land,” he wrote in *The News*, referring to the day of the bombings. “The hatred of their opponents resulted in the murder of Benazir's father through a contrived judicial verdict, the death of her two brothers in dubious circumstances, and the dismissal of her governments without completing their tenure of office.”

That history is still being written. Using the news media unabashedly, Ms. Bhutto has been outspoken in particular against terrorism, saying things that few local politicians dare to against the religious and jihadi groups. She is the only politician in Pakistan saying loudly and clearly that suicide bombing is against the teaching of Islam.

She has also attacked conservatives in the government, including officials close to the president, Gen. [Pervez Musharraf](#), accusing them of aiding and abetting extremists, and supporting the bombers who attacked her.

She has raised a warning against her old enemy, Pakistan's foremost intelligence agency, Inter-Services Intelligence, or ISI, and officials from the era of Gen. Muhammad Zia ul-Haq, who deposed and hanged her father, Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, saying they are working against her.

She has not attacked General Musharraf, with whom she has reached a tentative political agreement to allow her back to rally the moderate vote in Pakistan, except to repeat the party's standard position against military dictatorship. The understanding they have remains intact, an aide says.

It is the conservatives in his government and the ruling party, and some members of the intelligence services,

that she sees as her most dangerous rivals in the coming parliamentary election campaign, and she began her attack on them even before arriving in Pakistan.

"Ms. Bhutto arrived, not carrying flowers but a bunch of accusations," The Daily Times wrote in an editorial Sunday. "What has followed is a virulent verbal exchange."

The return attacks have been swift and nasty. The chief minister of Sindh Province, Ms. Bhutto's home province, warned that the rule of a woman would be a curse for Pakistan.

Chaudhry Shujaat Hussein, leader of the Pakistan Muslim League, which backs General Musharraf but has opposed his deal with Ms. Bhutto, suggested that Ms. Bhutto herself could be behind the bomb blasts, as a ploy for sympathy.

Muhammad Ejaz ul-Haq, the minister for religious affairs and the son of the late military dictator, General Zia ul-Haq, blamed Ms. Bhutto for playing with people's lives by not delaying her homecoming when she knew there were threats against her.

Such charges seem to fly in the face of the image that Ms. Bhutto studiously cultivated in her years abroad: that of a pro-Western democrat who can bring the people of Pakistan on board in the fight against terrorism.

But Ms. Bhutto's image has quickly become muddied with her return.

Critics on television talk shows and in the newspapers have been fuming about the presidential ordinance, passed on the eve of her return, that granted Ms. Bhutto and others an amnesty from all pending corruption cases in return for their support for General Musharraf to serve another term.

Many citizens are also disgusted by the ordinance, which seems to give free license to any corrupt politician. So are members of the military, who see the army being sullied by association, all so General Musharraf can stay in power.

The famous cricketer turned politician, Imran Khan, and his ex-wife, the wealthy British socialite Jemima Khan, lambasted Ms. Bhutto in articles in the British press. Ms. Khan called Ms. Bhutto a "a kleptocrat in a Hermès scarf."

Ms. Bhutto's return has also put murder on everyone's lips again in Karachi. Of course, almost any Pakistani can recall the day her father was hanged by the military government in 1979. But his is not the only killing that Ms. Bhutto's return evokes.

Residents of Karachi retell the story of how Murtaza Bhutto, Benazir's brother, was gunned down by the police, point out the spot where it happened just yards from his home, and recall how the police delayed taking him to a hospital and let him bleed in his seat.

Ms. Bhutto says it was the intelligence service that killed her brother. But many here point out that she was prime minister at the time, in 1996, and that her brother was challenging her for the leadership of the Pakistan Peoples Party.

Ms. Bhutto's argument that the ISI is behind such attacks, including the bombing of her homecoming procession, sounds too conspiratorial for many. But the deputy mayor of Karachi, Nasreen Jalil, who is from a rival political party, the Muttahida Quami Movement, said her allegations of ISI involvement were plausible. "We have seen such things in the past," she said.

But especially scalding in her criticism has been Ms. Bhutto's estranged niece, Fatima Bhutto, who holds Benazir Bhutto morally responsible for the death of Murtaza, her father. A 26-year-old newspaper columnist, Fatima lives in Karachi, and has been meeting with any journalist looking for a break from the crush at Benazir's court.

Fatima Bhutto argues that hard-won progress in grass-roots democracy will be jeopardized by Benazir, who is giving democracy a bad name with her pro-American agenda.

"She has put us all in danger of an Islamic backlash," she said in a recent interview. "I do believe Benazir is the most dangerous thing to happen to this country."

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