



An Appreciation: The Benazir Bhutto I Knew

By [Joe Pascal](#)

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Just four months ago, over tea at Barney's department store in Manhattan, my wife and I asked Benazir Bhutto if it was worth putting her life at risk by returning to her beloved country. In typical Benazir style, she said, "No, no, I can be killed by a taxi outside walking across the New York street. I cannot wait to lead my country to freedom." Today, not only do I feel the deep sorrow of losing a close and dear friend, but people around the world mourn the loss of an extraordinary woman.



Benazir Bhutto on the day of her death.
(Aamir Qureshi/AFP/Getty Images)

Even before she became prime minister of Pakistan in her mid-30s—the first woman leader in the Muslim world—Benazir led a remarkable life. At the age of 16, she gained admission to Harvard. She quickly adapted to Cambridge, Mass., but would frequently travel to New York City from the time she was a student until shortly before she was assassinated. She considered New York her "adopted

city."

When Benazir's father Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was then Pakistan's foreign minister, met President John F. Kennedy for the first time at the White House in October 1963, Kennedy was so impressed that he said to Zulfikar, "Too bad you are not American, because if you were, I would have appointed you to my cabinet." Zulfikar Bhutto responded in his humorous and clever way: "President Kennedy, that is very kind of you, but if I was American, I would not be in your cabinet but would be president of the United States!" Benazir not only had the charisma, humor, and leadership of her father (who went on to become prime minister), but, most important, she had a sixth sense of humanity that few leaders and politicians possess.

Newt Gingrich, the former House speaker, once said to me that "politics is a blood sport." Nevertheless, Benazir always believed the political arena was where individuals of different beliefs could resolve their differences through nonviolence. She firmly thought this even after her father, while he was prime minister, was dragged out in front of her by the military and subsequently executed.

Over the course of 11 years, when Benazir experienced solitary confinement and torture by the military dictatorship, her resolve grew for humanity, justice, and the inalienable right of all Pakistanis for freedom and democracy. On Oct. 26, 2007, Benazir wrote to me, "Still feel so sad that my father died so young but life has its own twists." Indeed, the day she returned to Pakistan from years of self-exile, two suicide bombers attacked her bus, killing 150 people in the worst terrorist act on Pakistani soil. The military government in Pakistan refused her request for proper security before the first attack and after it. On October 21, Benazir wrote to me, "We have a lot of security issues. The G.O.P. [government of Pakistan] says it will solve but then there is no movement. Soldiering on!" Then two days later she sent a note saying, "Joe, The govt is not letting us hold rallies. Cld u send me ur number so we can have chat when possible?" Shortly afterwards, the

government placed her under house arrest and prevented her from leading a 200-mile-plus rally with millions of people.

The military government never realized what it was up against. She recognized that dictatorships come and go, and populations can only be held down for so long with the barrel of a gun. Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi was one of Benazir's favorite examples of someone who will ultimately defeat the military. Benazir always believed in freedom of speech and information. In her early 20s, she was elected president of the Oxford Union, the independent debating society. It was unprecedented to have a Muslim, non-British woman be elected to lead the group. Some years later, partially due to Benazir's inspiration, I joined with Louise Bagshawe to form the Oxonian Society, an independent group that provides a mid-Manhattan forum for world leaders and celebrities to debate some of the most pressing issues of the day. Consistent with Benazir's belief in universal accessibility, we opened the society from the start to people without regard to educational background or financial means.

Benazir loved the idea and was one of the strongest supporters of the society. When I had her speak at the society, a female audience member stood up toward the end to ask a provocative question that seemed to turn into a speech: "How did you become prime minister in [a] traditional society, and why hasn't the United States elected a female president?" I politely interjected and said to the female questioner, "Madam, please allow the prime minister to answer the question and let others have the ability to also question the prime minister." Benazir then politely interrupted me and said "Joe, please let her finish her question. One woman knows how to talk to another woman." The audience rolled in laughter. Benazir believed in respect toward others, as she demonstrated in a humorous way at my expense!

Benazir could have chosen another road years ago. She could have easily been a model or anything she wanted to be. Nonetheless, she felt a higher calling to lead her nation. And she felt no terrorist or military dictator could defeat her. She

was one of the first world leaders that Osama bin Laden tried to assassinate in the early 1990s. And when then General Musharraf, Pakistan's military ruler, flew to Dubai earlier in the summer to negotiate with her, she never backed down on her belief of a quick implementation of inalienable human rights. Before the meeting, Musharraf had said that he would only agree to the meeting if she kept it secret from her political party and the public, and that he would also withhold the information. Nevertheless, as soon as the supposedly secret talks began, Musharraf had one of his aides inform the press in order to embarrass Benazir with the public and her party loyalists. Musharraf then asked Benazir to deny that a meeting occurred, but she refused since truth was one of her mottoes. She told Musharraf that she was scheduled to fly to London, where there would be a lot reporters waiting at the gate. Musharraf asked what he should do. And in her clever and joking way, Benazir told an unamused Musharraf that perhaps he should do what the extremist religious leader at Islamabad's Red Mosque did when he was trying to escape a government assault—put on a burka to pose as a woman!

Benazir also had a unique quality of kindness and caring. She would always begin her E-mails with something encouraging similar to the November 14 note that said, "I thank u for the excellent advice. I felt quite empowered myself after reading it." And she would usually end all correspondence with best wishes to my wife and daughter. Many of the 160 million people in Pakistan and people from around the world also felt empowered by her. She was a natural who believed in achieving higher goals through her humanity. New York and the world have lost a true leader, whose memory and beliefs will be carried on by many. My heart is with the people of Pakistan, especially the Bhutto family: Asif, Bilawal, Bakhtwar, and Aseefa.

Joe Pascal was a close friend of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto and is President of the Oxonian Society www.oxoniansociety.com