

The Bhutto saga takes a new turn

New Delhi/Islamabad - The sudden appearance, after 15 long years, of an Auditor General of Pakistan (AGP) report that Benazir Bhutto was ousted from power in 1990 as a result of a witch hunt approved by then president Ghulam Ishaq Khan lends an interesting twist to country's political situation.

The timing appears to have been decided by quarters close to President Pervez Musharraf who are trying to strike a deal between him and the former prime minister.

The AGP report says that Khan, GIK for short, had approved a payment of Rs.28 million to marshal 'an army of legal advisors' to file 19 corruption cases against Benazir Bhutto and her husband Asif Ali Zardari in 1990-92, the English daily The News reported Tuesday.

The AGP report, challenging the legality of Khan's actions, makes out Benazir as a victim of political vendetta. The report becoming public is unusual and it obviously boosts the political fortunes of Bhutto, who is plotting to return home from exile and hopes to contest elections likely to take place next year.

But it also threatens to divide the opposition ranks since Bhutto has signed a tactical deal with her rival Nawaz Sharif, who Musharraf ousted in a bloodless coup.

Both Bhutto and Sharif have worked out from their exile a 'Charter of Democracy' and are busy garnering support at home from other opposition parties and groupings seeking to challenge Musharraf.

However, the AGP report could mark a departure and prepare ground for a rapprochement between Bhutto and the military strongman.

The logic of this move is that if Musharraf can get Bhutto on board in a tactical political alliance, it would help hold at bay the Islamist forces that have been on the ascendance since 9/11, gaining substantial strength in federal parliament and in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and Balochistan.

These quarters, according to some media reports, are blessed by the US that would like to see moderates gaining in the next round of elections to facilitate the war against terrorism, more specifically in Afghanistan.

Bhutto, however, is unlikely to switch sides so easily and quickly from Sharif to Musharraf. Only last week a fresh non-bailable warrant was issued against her and his husband.

According to The News, the AGP's office has informed parliament's Public Accounts Committee of its findings made 15 years ago. The PAC is headed by Riaz Fatiana, a member of the National Assembly from Jhang, a lawyer who belongs to the pro-Musharraf Pakistan Muslim League (Qaid).

Cabinet Secretary Ejaz Rahim has been directed by a sub-committee of PAC to appear and explain as to 'how all these payments had been made without a formal clearance and approval of the justice division'.

The new development carries more than just a tinge of irony for Bhutto, who became the prime minister yet again in 1993, only to lose it in 1996.

On both occasions, she was succeeded by Sharif, who too was ousted twice, first by Khan and in 1999 by Musharraf.

A former Indian Civil Service (ICS) official who was once Pakistan's finance minister, Khan was pitchforked into prominence when President Zia-ul Haq died in an air crash in August 1988.

The 8th amendment to the constitution was passed when Khan was the president, giving him powers to 'check' the elected prime minister.

Khan used it against Bhutto and also against Sharif in 1993. But second time on, he too had to resign along with Sharif.

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