

# “MUSHARRAF CAN’T BECOME PRESIDENT”

For seven long years Benazir Bhutto has been dreaming of returning to Pakistan, the country she has served as prime minister twice. As she began finalising the details of her impending return to her homeland, the excitement was laced with uncertainty. Not surprising, since last week another former prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, who too was on a homecoming after eight years, was bundled from one airplane to another and banished to Jeddah in Saudi Arabia. The Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) leader spoke to INDIA TODAY Editor PRABHU CHAWLA for Aaj Tak. Excerpts from the interview.

**Q. So how do you feel about your impending departure for home?**

**A.** I am very excited. Seven years is a long time and I am wondering what changes have taken place.

**Q. What do you expect? A red carpet or the reception that Sharif got?**

**A.** I don’t know how I will be received. But I am not in the same boat as him. He has been convicted by the court of law and sentenced for treason and tax evasion. He had traded his imprisonment for a 10-year exile in Saudi Arabia with his family and this involved foreign guarantees. I was given the same offer. But I refused. So unlike Nawaz Sharif, I cannot be put on a plane and sent out.

**Q. But the Government will not allow you also to return as there are charges pending against you.**

**A.** The corruption charges against me have not been withdrawn. As far as I am concerned, I am out on bail and should not be arrested. I stayed out so I would not lose my freedom of expression, freedom of speech, freedom of movement and association.

**Q. Is there an agreement with General Musharraf that he would be your presidential choice and you will be his prime minister?**

**A.** The discussion or transition to democracy has not been successful so far. I am going back in an uncertain environment.

**Q. Is there any deal with him?**

**A.** Of course not. Please do not use this word. It is unfair to my long history of suffering.

**Q. I know you will not admit it but you went to Abu Dhabi to meet him.**

**A.** That was a non-meeting.

**Q. Non-meeting or no meeting.**

**A.** Neither side has officially admitted to the meeting. But contacts between the regime and PPP have been taking place since 1999.

**Q. General Musharraf’s popularity is on the wane and he needs a civilian face to stay in power. Are you willing to protect him?**

**A.** Whether he needs someone to protect him or not, only he can answer. But the people of Pakistan need someone to fight for their rights.

**Q. You are Benazir Bhutto, who is in exile, facing persecution and whose father was executed. Is it right on your part to compromise with someone who has deposed an elected prime minister?**

**A.** I cannot compromise. I am seeking the restoration of democracy.

**Q. Prime ministers rarely survive their full term in Pakistan. You yourself were dismissed twice. Is there something wrong with the DNA of Pakistan which makes military rulers throw out elected rulers?**

**A.** I feel very upset to hear that there is something wrong with the DNA of Pakistan. Unfortunately, the military has impeded the democratic growth of Pakistan, unlike in India where you have a democracy and a peaceful transfer of power. India is also emerging as an economic powerhouse and is a force to reckon with on the world stage.

**Q. But we have the same blood. We are only divided by geography.**

**A.** Because of the military, Pakistan has not developed institu-

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tions or has had a stable environment where growth can take place.

**Q. Have you set any pre-conditions for your return to Pakistan?**

**A.** There are no agreements. I am going back unconditionally.

**Q. You have been holding talks.**

**A.** Everybody is talking. Sharif has been talking since 2000, otherwise how could he go to Saudi Arabia?

**Q. Will you allow Musharraf to continue as President?**

**A.** There has been a dialogue, but there has been no agreement. The dialogue is not about personalities but about holding of free and fair elections to get civilians in power

**Q. If Musharraf gives up the uniform, can he be the President?**

**A.** First, this question is premature. Second, it is not for me to choose the President. The people will decide.

**Q. Will your party support Musharraf if he stays in uniform?**

**A.** We oppose a unformed presidency.

**Q. What comes first? Kashmir or uniform?**

**A.** That’s a good question.

**Q. You are dodging the issue.**

**A.** No, I am not. It is not based on one element. If today, for example, Musharraf announces that he will give up the uniform, it doesn’t mean there will be an agreement. Same if he were to lift the ban on twice-elected prime ministers from contesting.

**Q. You have not defined the transition of democracy.**

**A.** We are for holding of free and fair elections.

**Q. In India, we cannot make a general the President under our Constitution.**

**A.** In your country, you make even a nuclear scientist the President. If we did something like that in Pakistan, there would be utter chaos.

**Q. But our nuclear scientists do not sell state secrets abroad. Why don’t you make a rule that prohibits generals from becoming President?**

**A.** I think you are right. In Pakistan, we make rules but the military does not allow us to implement them.

**Q. Has Musharraf lost the will of the people?**

**A.** Opinion polls suggest that.

**Q. Should he go?**

**A.** This is for the people to decide.

**Q. You represent the people, don't you?**

A. I am no Nostradamus. I cannot predict events.

**Q. The judiciary has been very active in Pakistan.**

A. Yes. Under the restored chief justice. We have great satisfaction that there is a check from the Supreme Court in disputed matters. But there are disputes over everything.

**Q. Are you going to be a future prime minister or prisoner?**

A. There are questions that don't have answers. Will elections be held? Will they be free and fair? Will opposition parties get together?

**Q. The only permanent answer is that Musharraf will stay.**

A. That is also uncertain. The question is if Musharraf is eligible to contest another term in office.

According to the Constitution, as a former army chief, there's a two-year bar on a government servant to contest. So this issue will end up in courts.

**Q. So you are saying Musharraf should give up the uniform, the ban on twice-elected prime ministers contesting elections should be lifted and ...**

A. It is important that all corruption cases against party workers be lifted and immunity be given to them. This is in everyone's interest.

**Q. Do you support Sharif's deportation?**

A. The courts have to rule in this matter. Every citizen has the right to come back. But the other argument is that Sharif traded his rights to live in Pakistan for the dropping of charges against him.

**Q. Is your fight against Sharif or Musharraf?**

A. My fight is for democracy.

**Q. But he has scored a symbolic victory over you.**

A. I don't buy it. Very few people were present at the airport when he arrived. He made a mistake by making a deal, involving foreign parties and so on. But people can review mistakes. And I hope he will.

**Q. People say America is playing the intermediary between you and Musharraf.**

A. They are going back and forth in Pakistan in the larger interest of the war against terrorism.

**Q. Are you not talking to them? Aren't you the US nominee for the prime ministership of Pakistan?**

A. Of course, we have been talking to them. They talk to all parties. This is the nature of political discourse. We welcome their democratic support.

**Q. But unlike you, Sharif is clear that he will not talk to a dictator.**

A. I disagree, because he did talk.

**Q. That was earlier.**

A. We are told that he talked. He was supposed to be travelling on Gulf Air earlier, but he went on a state PIA plane later.

**Q. Are you saying he had a secret deal with the Government?**

A. I don't know.

Musharraf. The hardliners who formed the Mujahideen and became members of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda do not want the people to get back their rights because their agenda will be rolled back.

**Q. So for you, restoration of democracy is more important than whether Musharraf stays in power or not.**

A. No. For me, the right of the people to choose their leaders is most important.

**Q. And is it none of your business whether Musharraf is chosen or not?**

A. The question is whether he is eligible or not.

**Q. You are also not eligible to become prime minister under the current laws.**



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**Q. Will you become prime minister under Musharraf as President?**

A. This will depend on the people of Pakistan if they get to vote in free and fair elections.

**Q. Assume that the elections are fair.**

A. I can't do so because of the ground realities. The point is Pakistan is in turmoil because of so many issues and no one knows the course. Things could lead to an emergency, a military rule and deferment of polls. Even the militant hardliners are frightened of democracy. They seem to have adopted a Minus 3 Formula now—first it was opposition to me, then Sharif and now me, Sharif and

A. Yes, but I can contest elections and Parliament can change the law.

**Q. But you would like to become prime minister.**

A. Yes. If people give me the mandate, it will be a great honour.

**Q. In the event of your party coming to power, is your candidature for prime ministership certain?**

A. Of course, my party has only one candidate.

**Q. So your mission to Pakistan is to return as prime minister and restore democracy.**

A. I can sit back and ask why should I take the risk? But I believe every Pakistani has the right to live in Pakistan.