

The game of death

Written by Shahidul Alam

She may well have been the best leader available. With a military dictator and a corrupt businessman as the alternatives, Benazir Bhutto, with her western admirers and her feudal followers, was clearly a front-runner. How she died will probably remain a mystery, but she was playing the game of death, and it was unlikely she would win every time.

It is difficult to write about people who have just died. Many are grief stricken at the untimely death of the former prime minister. Even her critics are shocked by the way she was hunted down. An insensitive piece would aggravate their pain, and one doesn't generally speak ill of the dead. I remember as a child asking my mother "Amma. Do bad people never die?" A man not known for his strength of character had died, and newspaper reports had described him as an honest social worker. I am no longer of the age to get away with such questions. But even for those who have loved Benazir, I believe the questions need to be asked if this cycle is to ever stop.

It was 1995. They were troubled times in Pakistan. I had gone over to Karachi on the invitation of my architect friend Shahid Abdulla. There were no telephone booths at Karachi airport, or anywhere else in the city. The government was worried the MQM (Muttahida Quomi Mahaz), would use them for their communication. Sindh was at war with itself.

Shahid wanted me to run a photography workshop at the Indus Valley School of Architecture and Design that he was involved in. Those were the days when we had time for long conversations. We talked of many things. The gun-toting security men outside every big house in Karachi. Shahid's meeting with Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. His memories of Benazir. But the conversation would often veer to a person we both admired. Abdus Sattar Edhi, the humanitarian who had set up an unparalleled ambulance service all over Pakistan.

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On the morning of the 10th October, I went over to see the man. He had an easy charm that came from living a simple life and having little to hide. He sat on his wire mesh bed, talking of how things started. We were regularly interrupted by people coming in with requests, and Edhi responding to minor crises. Then we heard about Fahim Commando the MQM leader, having been killed. Fahim and his comrades had apparently been caught in an ambush and all four had died. They had been in police custody, but the police had all escaped and not one of them had been injured. Edhi was not judgmental. Fahim was another man who needed a decent burial. As I watched him bathe the slain MQM leader, I could see the burn marks on the bullet holes on the commando's body.

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