



## Pakistan waits as Bhutto clan trades blows

Benazir's husband hopes to become President next weekend, but he faces bitter opposition from within the family

By Omar Waraich  
IN ISLAMABAD

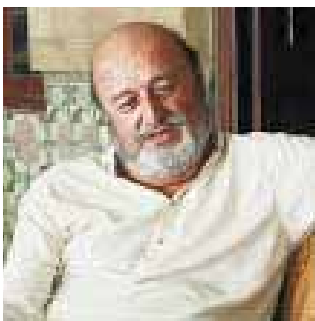
Asif Ali Zardari is poised to become President of Pakistan next weekend after inheriting the political mantle of his wife, Benazir Bhutto, who was assassinated last December. But he faces bitter opposition from within the country's pre-eminent political dynasty.

Mumtaz Ali Bhutto, Benazir's great-uncle and head of the Bhutto clan, told *The Independent on Sunday* last week that the prospect of Mr Zardari becoming President was the latest in a series of tragedies to afflict the family – and Pakistan. “It’s unfortunate for the country, and ... for the party that a man of his background should become ... President,” he said. “He is totally corrupt and utterly illiterate ... If he becomes the next President, what will be left of this country?”

Derided as a playboy when Benazir married him, and de-

nounced for his alleged corruption during her two terms as Prime Minister, Mr Zardari was bequeathed the leadership of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in her will, and enjoys its “unanimous nomination”. Given the pledges of support from a slew of smaller parties, his victory in Saturday's indirect election to replace Pervez Musharraf appears secure. But the prospect has implications far beyond the disputes within the Bhutto family.

Mr Musharraf, who seized power in a bloodless coup in 1999, became a key ally of the West after 9/11 and supported the invasion of neighbouring Afghanistan, where the Taliban regime had given al-Qa'ida a base. But his mounting unpopularity undermined Pakistan's stability, to the point where it is now considered to have become al-Qa'ida's main base. Washington and its allies are watching anxiously to see whether a return to civilian rule, in the shape of Mr Zardari, will reverse the



Benazir Bhutto's widower Asif Ali Zardari, top, and uncle Mumtaz Bhutto, above ASIF HASAN/AFP, AP

country's slide into extremism.

Divisions in the family stretch back to the hanging of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto – Benazir's father and founder of the PPP – by a previous military dictator in 1979, and have deepened with each successive death. Both of Benazir's brothers, Shahnawaz and Murtaza, were killed in still disputed circumstances. They lie buried close to her and their father in the family mausoleum near Larkana, in Sindh province.

After Benazir, say her followers, Mr Zardari was the obvious successor until their 20-year-old son Bilawal comes of age. Mumtaz, who left the party two decades ago after differences with Benazir, feels that the leadership of the PPP should never have left the family. “The party was always led by the Bhuttos, and that's how I think Mr Bhutto wanted it,” he said. “The Zardaris have now taken over the party.”

Mumtaz alleges that under Mr Zardari's control the PPP had misplaced priorities after the as-

sassination. “They should have gone into mourning and chased the killers [of Benazir],” he said. “They should have devoted all the forces and energies to ... bringing them to justice. Instead they ... took advantage of the sentiment created by her slaughter. It was with indecent haste they got through the elections and formed a government.”

The two warring wings of the family came close to an open clash earlier this year. Mr Zardari asked his younger sister, Faryal Talpur, to stand for Benazir's old seat. “It is our family's seat, first held by my father,” said Mumtaz. “When Mr [Zulfikar Ali] Bhutto came on the scene, he asked my father to give him the constituency, which he did and retired from politics.”

Mumtaz urged Fatima, Benazir's estranged niece and daughter of her slain brother Murtaza, to stand against Ms Talpur. Since her father's killing at the hands of policemen under Benazir's government in 1996,

Fatima and her mother Ghinwa have maintained that Benazir and Mr Zardari carried at least “moral responsibility” for the death – something the couple always denied. Fatima has so far steered clear of politics, and she turned down Mumtaz's request.

Mumtaz says he remains close to Fatima and her family. “We are together. The rest of the family is very united and close knit,” he says. When another woman bearing the Bhutto name – Shahnawaz's daughter Sassi – briefly returned to Pakistan two months ago, there was a flurry of speculation that the clan would mount a collective challenge to reclaim the party. But Mumtaz poured cold water on the claim.

“As far as the party is concerned, I think that's a gone thing,” he said. “I don't think the People's Party of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, or even Benazir, exists any longer. Zardari has put his mark on it. We are not going to try and take it over.”

## 2,000 feared dead as floods swamp hundreds of Indian villages

By Nina Lakhani

Up to 2,000 people are feared dead after a river changed course, flooding hundreds of villages in the Indian state of Bihar. Stranded villagers were surviving on uncooked rice mixed with dirty water, as authorities struggled to deliver

aid to the displaced millions after the worst floods to hit the eastern state in 50 years.

Around 90 people have been confirmed dead by officials, but aid agencies believe the death toll is much higher. Unicef said more than 1,000 villages had been affected by surging waters, which submerged thousands of homes

and damaged water and electricity supplies. An estimated 100,000 hectares of farmland is thought to have been ruined.

Heavy rain and damaged roads continued to hamper aid efforts, leaving hundreds of thousands of people without food and clean water. Rapid changes in the river's course have forced many

people to move shelter several times, and to sell precious livestock just to survive.

One villager, Sabia Devi, said: “I sold my goat for just 50 rupees, which on any other day could have brought me 2,000 rupees.”

Monsoon floods are an annual event in this area, but the Kosi river burst a dam in neighbour-

ing Nepal this month, deluging Bihar and flooding villages in its path as authorities failed to evacuate millions of people in time.

About 350,000 people have been evacuated in Bihar over the past 10 days, but aid agencies have raised concerns over hygiene conditions at government-run relief camps.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and the head of the ruling Congress Party, Sonia Gandhi, flew over devastated areas last Thursday. They said £125m in aid would be made available.

Nitish Mishra, Bihar's disaster management minister, said: “Rains are killing our rescue and relief efforts.”