

"Comrade" Zardari

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This is an age of fantastic nonsense. At least, when it comes to politics. By twice electing George Bush as its president, the USA was an unchallenged master, until recently, in the arena of political foolishness.

The USA now stands outmanœuvred by Socialist International that elected Asif Ali Zardari as its vice-president during its XXIII Congress, (30 June-02 July), held at Athens. Though Zardari's elevation as Socialist International vice-president was hopelessly surprising yet even surprising is Zardari's flirtation with socialism.

After seizing the leadership of Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), he stunned many when he was seen hosting a Socialist International Asia-Pacific meeting in Islamabad on May 30. It was stunning not merely because any left-turn by PPP is impossible. It is surprising since any such turn under Asif Ali Zardari is absurdly unlikely.

Gone are the days when PPP, founded by charismatic Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, upheld the principals:

Islam is our Faith

Democracy is our politics

Socialism is our Economy

All Power to the People

On coming to power, the first PPP government, headed by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, went for nationalization in three phases. In January 1972 and January 1974, banks, petroleum companies and shipping companies, oil refineries besides industries in iron, steel, engineering, chemicals, petrochemicals, cement and public utilities were nationalized.

On July 1, 1976 in yet another drive to nationalize the industry, the government nationalized 2815 cotton, ginning and rice husking units.

Similarly, in 1972 and 1977, land reforms were introduced. 2,826,4000 acres were appropriated. True, the land reforms proved half-hearted and nationalization degenerated into bureaucratisation. However, the first PPP government remains the only administration that introduced reforms benefiting working classes. This, however, does not in any sense make Ali Bhutto's government a socialist one.

On the contrary, the 'socialist measures' by a Bonapartist Bhutto government were aimed at pacifying the charged up working classes while keeping feudalism and capitalism intact.

He himself candidly dispelled any illusion, on winning 1970 general elections, about his being a socialist. When asked if he received any monetary help from China to contest elections, he stated: *"The most angry people in Pakistan today are the communists for they know I have stopped the tide of communism by introducing Islamic socialism in this country.....In fact I have done more to combat communism in Asia than the Americans in spite of all the resources and the money they have*

piled into this part of the world. Before these elections the choice in Pakistan was a straight one between communism and capitalism'. How true.

The choice even after the elections was 'between communism and capitalism'. Bhutto was mistaken in lulling himself to the belief that he would strike a balance between his class of feudal lords and his electorate of serfs. He realized this mistake too. But only when he had landed himself in a death cell. In 1979, a military dictator sent Bhutto to gallows with tacit support lent by Washington. His murder was a multi-faceted tragedy as, among other things, it reduced PPP to a family heirloom.

Ali Bhutto's successor-daughter, Benazir Bhutto was never a radical or may be she thought it wise to seek shelter underneath the imperial umbrella. That her father had already purged the PPP of left radicals, made it even easy for Benazir Bhotto to eulogise Swedish model as the panacea for all the ills facing Pakistan.

Hence, when she returned from exile in 1986, the one-million crowd that welcomed her in Lahore was chanting in vain: *Benazir aai hej, Inqlab lai hej* (Benazir has returned and has brought revolution).

What Benazir had returned with was an agenda for privatization, downsizing, right-sizing. She ruthlessly perused this programme when she came to power in 1988 even if 'Socialism is our Economy' was still on the PPP statute books.

However, when in 1993, PPP went to elections, it rid even its statute books of 'Socialism is our Economy'.

Her second stint in power has been superbly portrayed by Tariq Ali: "*By the time she was re-elected in 1993, she had abandoned all idea of reform, but that she was in a hurry to do something became clear when she appointed her husband minister for investment, making him responsible for all investment offers from home and abroad. It is widely alleged that the couple accumulated \$1.5 billion. The high command of the Pakistan People's Party now became a machine for making money, but without any trickle-down mechanism*".

Surrey Palace, SGS Cotectna, jam-eating horses, gem-studded necklace became catch phrases in Pakistan press and politics. Now an unofficial PPP manifesto had become:

USA is our faith.

Double-speak is our politics

Corruption is our Economy

All power to the Khaki people

The Vice President of Socialist International, Comrade Asif Ali Zardari is a superb delineation of new-PPP statutes. When Benazir Bhotto formed her first government in 1988, that lasted until 1990, he earned himself the sobriquet : Mr Ten Percent.

In three years time, during Benazir's second stint in power (1993-96), he pole-vaulted himself to Mr Cent Percent. And consequently landed himself in jail for almost ten years. It was to secure his release, many believe, that Benazir Bhutto kept on compromising with Musharraf regime.

He was, in due course, released as co-operation between Musharraf and Benazir evolved into a political compromise. Her return to Pakistan, October last year, was a part of this deal. However, on her return she wisely kept Asif Ali Zardari abroad. Alas! all her attempts proved futile. In her

murder, a double tragedy struck Pakistan. First, Pakistan was deprived of her only national-level woman leader. Second, Zardari was back in Pakistan and also on the helm of party-government affairs.

Hardly had anybody any illusions in him when he became an unchallenged master of PPP government despite his trimmed down mustache and permanently stretched lips in an attempt to pose a changed image.

No facial re-doing helped him rehabilitate his image damaged beyond repair. But one must praise Master Zardari, whose rise to power every time is always in direct proportion to fall in PPP popularity, for being cagey. The day he came across membership card Benazir Bhutto had secured to enter Socialist club, he decided to give this camaraderie a try. Luckily, Socialist International is no crazy Marxist tendency founded by some V I Lenin or Leon Trotsky. A bunch of degenerated social democrats, Socialist International is ready to embrace any party in the third world ready to serve global capital.

Its section in Nepal is pro-monarchy Nepalese Congress. Hence, Zardari's elevation as Socialist International's vice-president is deservedly in a way.

Nonetheless, it is 'Comrade' Zardari who has benefited. First, he has been able to use the credentials lent by Socialist International to build his image. Secondly, he has sown a confusion among working class and advance layer of PPP activists.

Every time Zardari will grace a Socialist International meeting, poor PPP sympathizers will, hoping against hope, expect a left turn. Unfortunately, such a turn will never come.