

Neighbours New Beginnings. (1989, January 15). *India today.*

NEIGHBOURS NEW BEGINNINGS

LIKE a tempest, gusts of democracy blew across India's neighbouring countries last year, toppling regimes, uprooting systems of governance. In country after country, column upon column of the people clogged the streets: protesting against authoritarianism; cheering and clapping for democracy; queuing up for hours to cast their ballots.

It all began with Burma's summer of discontent. Protest reached a shattering pitch, forcing strongman Ne Win to step down after two-and-a-half decades of iron rule. And once democratic forces gained momentum, they seemed possessed of an infectious fervour—in defiance of terrorist threats, Sri Lanka went to the polls; in neighbouring Maldives, popular rule was restored after a minor hiccup; and towards year-end, 35-year-old Benazir Bhutto's coronation in Pakistan made her the first woman to lead a Muslim country.

It was on August 18, 1988, that Pakistan's democratic destiny began unfolding. On that day, Pakistani caudillo, President Zia-ul-Haq, who had reigned supreme for 11 years, was blown up in a military aircraft. A period of turbulence was predicted for the nation. But the Cassandras were proven wrong: instead of devolving into chaos, Pakistan crossed the road blocks to representative rule with remarkable ease. And Benazir Bhutto achieved something few leaders have since the country's inception: a legitimacy untainted by assassination, coup or electoral fraud. Her installation as *Wazir-e-Azam*

capped the most peaceful transition to democracy in Pakistan's 41-year history. Charismatic, intelligent and gutsy (pregnancy did not deter her from campaigning

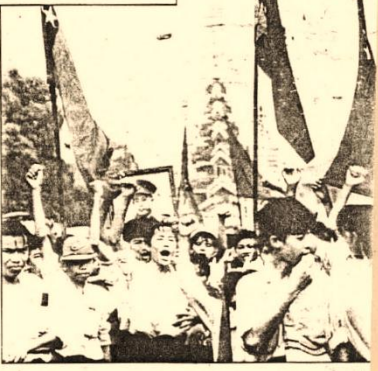


vigorously), Benazir reclaimed the legacy of her father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. The resurrection of Bhutto was, in fact, the most striking feature of the Pakistan People's Party's campaign. But ironically, a slender lead compelled Benazir—a consummate politician—to horse-trade with the very forces that had sent her father to the gallows—the mullahs, the landlords, the businessmen and most crucially, the army. Asked if she would like to cut the army's budget, Benazir had replied: "Surely, if you want to bring in martial law." In some ways Benazir may seem a victress in chains ("To survive in politics you have to keep a centre of

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◀ **The cry for democracy ended strongman Ne Win's reign, yet Burma's revolt did not reach a decisive stage.**

gravity"). Yet, for Pakistan she represents a new beginning. The path to people's power was more bumpy in Sri Lanka. For the Tamils of the North-east—except the LTTE who were driven into the jungles by the IPKF—1988 was possibly a less miserable year than 1987. The presence of Indian

troops restored some semblance of order to their distracted lives. And on November 19, the Tamils amazed other Sri Lankans by turning out in force to vote for a provincial council. Courtesy Indian guns, the North-east got its council and a terrorist-turned-democrat as chief minister.

But it was the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) that took centre-stage in 1988, killing at least 600 people. The JVP's main platform: opposition to "Indian occupation". The LTTE-JVP combine became Sri Lanka's hydra-headed monster.

1988 was also the year when the Colossus of Sri Lanka, President Junius R. Jayewardene did his bit for democracy. Like Zia, he had held power for 11 years and like Zia was prone to fits of authoritarianism. But after two terms the 82-year-old President finally decided to step down, and on December 19 the people gave their mandate to Ranasinghe Premadasa of the ruling United National Party. The democratic process came full circle when Jayewardene dissolved the 11-year-old Parliament—whose term had been extended during Jayewardene's reign—and scheduled polls for February 15.

Fighting bullets with the ballot was probably the sanest step to take in a blood crazed environment. But India was worried as Premadasa had strongly opposed the Indo-Sri Lanka pact. At best, he will give it lukewarm support. But given the geo-political realities, it is doubtful if he can totally repudiate the agreement. Though polls have restored a semblance of order to the troubled, tear drop island, Sri Lanka's civil war is far from over.

Big Boy India's military role in the region was further underscored during a coup attempt in the Maldives. A distress call from President

Maumoon Abdul Gayoom on November 11 saw Rajiv Gandhi rushing Indian troops to save the remote islands. After a dramatic chase on the high seas, the Indian Navy nabbed the 100 odd mercenaries, successfully squashing the comic-book coup attempt. President Gayoom bent over backwards to express his gratitude, and so did the citizens—without displaying signs of a damaged ego as had happened in Sri Lanka.

In sharp contrast to such fairy-tale piracy, the most vivid image from Burma was of a machine-gun nest on a Kangoon roof-top and policemen mowing down demonstrators on the street below. If 1988 was one of Burma's bloodiest years, it was also the year when the Indian public became aware of its eastern neighbour. Though there were some gains for the pro-democracy forces—political parties have been legalised and a nebulous promise of elections made—the Burmese revolt is yet to come to its logical conclusion.

In Bangladesh, after opposition to him mounted following a stage-managed election in March, President Mohammed Ershad sought God's aid—he made Bangladesh an Islamic state. But Allah did not seem to be on his side—in September, the worst floods of the century submerged two-thirds of the nation; in November, a devastating cyclone left 1,000 dead. In this deluge of disaster, the demand for democracy and voices of dissent against dictatorship were drowned.

Comparisons may be odious, but being witness to their neighbours' struggles for freedom, citizens of India should consider themselves privileged for being born in a land which has nurtured the world's most populous democracy.

—SABA NAQVI BHAIJIK