

Benazir Bhutto's First Ministry (1988–1990)

Political Background and Democratic Transition

The death of General Zia-ul-Haq in 1988 marked the end of an eleven-year military dictatorship in Pakistan. The country stood at a crucial turning point, transitioning back to democracy after a long period of political repression and Islamization policies. The general elections of 1988 were historic, as they restored parliamentary politics and gave rise to Benazir Bhutto — the daughter of the executed former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.

Benazir's victory was symbolic, not only for Pakistan but for the entire Muslim world, as she became the first woman to lead a Muslim-majority country. The public had high expectations for change, social justice, and economic recovery. However, despite the return to civilian rule, the military establishment continued to exert significant influence over national security and foreign policy. The state institutions were weak, and political distrust persisted between the civilian leadership and the military elite.

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Benazir Bhutto assumed office as the head of a coalition government formed by the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) along with the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) and smaller regional groups. Her first administration aimed to reverse the legacy of authoritarianism by promoting democratic freedoms, especially the freedom of the press, women's rights, and judicial independence.

However, her government faced several structural challenges from the very beginning. The opposition alliance, known as the Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (IJI), backed by conservative and establishment forces, worked actively to destabilize her. Relations with the military remained tense, particularly over policy differences regarding Afghanistan and intelligence matters. Bureaucratic resistance and administrative inertia further limited her ability to implement reforms effectively. Public impatience grew as economic relief and development were slower than expected.

Challenges and Problems During the First Tenure

Benazir's first government soon found itself entangled in multiple crises. Allegations of corruption, nepotism, and favoritism within her administration began to erode public confidence in her leadership. Pakistan's economy suffered from inflation, unemployment, and declining foreign reserves, which worsened the daily lives of ordinary citizens.

Her relationship with President Ghulam Ishaq Khan was increasingly confrontational, leading to policy paralysis and administrative gridlock. The law and order situation, particularly in Karachi and Sindh, deteriorated sharply, with political violence and unrest spreading across urban areas. Opposition parties accused the government of political victimization and failing to develop a

national consensus. The strained civil-military relations further undermined political stability, preventing the establishment of long-term institutional harmony.

Dismissal of the First Government (1990)

In August 1990, President Ghulam Ishaq Khan dismissed Benazir Bhutto's government under Article 58(2)(b) of the Constitution, citing corruption, mismanagement, and poor governance as the main reasons. This marked the first major political dismissal in Pakistan's democratic phase following Zia's rule.

The dismissal reflected deep institutional mistrust and ongoing establishment interference in civilian affairs. The opposition alliance, led by Nawaz Sharif's Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (IJI), capitalized on this situation and received indirect support from segments of the military and bureaucracy. In the subsequent elections, the PPP suffered defeat, and Nawaz Sharif emerged as the new Prime Minister. The event exposed the fragile nature of Pakistan's democracy, where elected governments could be easily dismissed under pressure from the establishment.

Benazir's Return and Second Ministry (1993–1996)

By 1993, Pakistan was again in political turmoil. Constant conflict between Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and President Ghulam Ishaq Khan created a deadlock that led to their joint resignation under military pressure. Fresh elections were held, and Benazir Bhutto made a political comeback, promising a more stable and cooperative government.

Her second term started with optimism. She tried to maintain better relations with the military and judiciary, avoiding the confrontations that had marked her earlier tenure. Her government focused on privatization, infrastructure development, and attracting foreign investment. In foreign affairs, Benazir sought to improve relations with India and Afghanistan through dialogue. She also gave renewed attention to education, health, and women's economic empowerment, projecting Pakistan as a moderate and progressive state. However, despite these efforts, old patterns of mismanagement and corruption began to resurface.

Family Feuds, Corruption, and Economic Problems

Benazir's second term was overshadowed by personal and political turmoil. Her relationship with her younger brother, Mir Murtaza Bhutto, turned hostile. Murtaza accused her government of betraying the PPP's founding principles and compromising with the establishment. Their rivalry became public and politically damaging. The situation escalated after Murtaza Bhutto's mysterious death in 1996 in a police encounter near Karachi, a tragedy that severely damaged Benazir's image and credibility.

Simultaneously, Pakistan's economic condition worsened. Inflation soared, fiscal deficits widened, and investor confidence declined. Corruption scandals involving government officials and her husband, Asif Ali Zardari, further eroded public trust. Media coverage of alleged

financial kickbacks and misuse of authority dominated national headlines. Law and order, especially in Sindh, deteriorated sharply, weakening the state's authority and PPP's popularity.

Dismissal and Political Legacy (1996)

In November 1996, President Farooq Leghari dismissed Benazir Bhutto's second government, again invoking Article 58(2)(b). The charges included corruption, administrative failure, and deteriorating law and order. The dismissal marked the second time Benazir was removed from office — a reflection of Pakistan's enduring institutional instability and weak democratic foundations.

Despite her removal, Benazir Bhutto remains one of the most significant figures in Pakistan's political history. She symbolized resistance against dictatorship, the fight for civilian supremacy, and the empowerment of women in politics. Her leadership gave Pakistan an international image of progressivism and courage. Although her governments were marred by controversy, her democratic ideals and political struggle continue to inspire future generations and serve as a reminder of Pakistan's ongoing journey toward stable democracy.

Conclusion

Benazir Bhutto's two terms as Prime Minister (1988–1990 and 1993–1996) highlight the turbulence of Pakistan's democracy in the final decade of the 20th century. Her leadership combined vision, courage, and determination but was constrained by institutional weakness, corruption, family divisions, and powerful establishment interference. Despite her repeated dismissals, Benazir's enduring legacy lies in her struggle for democracy, gender equality, and civilian authority — ideals that continue to shape Pakistan's political discourse today.