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Review: Benazir Bhutto, *Reconciliation: Islam, Democracy and the West*

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Benazir Bhutto, *Reconciliation: Islam, Democracy and the West*.
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“If you would not be forgotten, as soon as you are dead and rotten; Either write things worth reading, or do things worth writing” (Benjamin Franklin). Benazir Bhutto did both. She started to write this book, her masterpiece undoubtedly, during eight years of exile. She was going to finalize the draft of this book on her return to Pakistan, until her last breath, as the main manuscript was found in her handbag at the time of her assassination on 27 December 2007 in Rawalpindi, Pakistan.

The central theme of this book is an explanation of the numerous conflicts that have defined international relations in recent years, including the so-called “Clash of Civilizations” between the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds, and the various conflicts within Muslim societies. The value of this book, however, lies not only in its comprehensive explanation of these conflicts, but also in the panacea Bhutto prescribes for all of these conflicts: “accommodation and reconciliation.”¹

In the first chapter, Bhutto describes her arrival back to Pakistan, after eight years of exile due to the military regime of General Pervez Musharaf. That day - 18 October 2007 - which was so joyful to her, ended in tragedy due to a suicide attack on her motorcade near Karachi airport, killing hundreds of her party workers.

The second chapter gives a comprehensive account of intra-Islamic sectarian, political, and religious conflicts. Bhutto explains their genesis, nature and effects on Muslim societies all over the world coherently and in depth. Notwithstanding her public image as a modern, liberal woman, Bhutto possesses a detailed knowledge of Islamic tradition and history. What differentiates her from many

¹ (p.16)

other commentators on political Islam is that she eloquently clarifies misconceptions dominant in the Western academy, especially regarding the rights of women in Islam and the alleged incompatibility of Islam with democracy. She argues that “Islam is not the caricature that is often portrayed in Western media.”² To clarify her arguments, she quotes many references from the Koran and the hadith (the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), revealing a sophisticated engagement with both modern and traditional Islamic thought and jurisprudence.

After reading the third chapter, it is very hard to blame Muslim societies, as popular critics often do, for their lack of democracy and democratic values. Bhutto explains how, throughout modern history, the West, the champion of democracy, has itself been responsible for blocking “any reasonable chance for democratic development in Muslim-majority countries.”³ From colonialism to the Cold War, the West has opposed and disrupted democratic movements in many Muslim countries, particularly in the Middle East, for its own economic and geo-strategic interests. American “dirty politics” in Iran during Raza Shah’s regime, France’s opposition to demands for democracy in Tunisia and Comoros and Britain’s actions against the *Wafd* party in Egypt are some of the many examples she uses in this chapter to prove her hypothesis. Interestingly, she includes many examples from non-Muslim countries, such as Greece, Argentina and Congo, where the West behaved similarly in blocking democratic regimes. In this chapter, Bhutto displays a strong grip on contemporary world affairs and global political history.

The fourth chapter focuses on Pakistan. Bhutto describes the independence movement of the early twentieth century, the partition of India, its consequences for the two new states of Pakistan and India, and the early history of Pakistani state-building. She then explains in detail the two main reasons, as she sees it, for the dysfunctional politics and the failure of democracy in Pakistan. These are the early death of Mr. Jinnah and the lack of grassroots political organization in the Pakistan Muslim League, the party which achieved independence from British rule.⁴ Although eloquent and informative, this chapter seems misplaced in a book addressing the bigger issue of reconciliation between Islam and other civilizations of the world.

In the fifth chapter, she expands the debate on the “Clash of Civilizations” by tracing the development of this concept from the early Twentieth century until the

² (p. 18)

³ (p. 81)

⁴ (p.167)

present. She provides a comprehensive review of this discussion from Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (1918) to Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations* (1993). Interestingly, like an expert political writer, she adds her criticism on all these hypotheses of conflicts and confrontation among different civilizations of the world. In the later part of this chapter, she divides contemporary commentators on civilizational conflict into two groups: the "Clashers," who believe a clash of civilizations is inevitable, and the "Reconciliationists," who believe the contrary⁵. Placing herself in the latter category, she criticizes the former eloquently. A more interesting insight in this chapter is her categorization of the "Clasher" group into two sub-groups: "Intellectual Clashers" like Huntington, and "Radical Clashers," like Robert Spencer and Hizbul-Tahrir.

One can find the height of her argumentation in the sixth and final chapter of this book where Bhutto explains the main viewpoints of her own group: the "Reconciliationists." However the real worth of this chapter is that, besides advocating for reconciliation among civilizations of the world, she stresses that intra-Islamic reconciliation is equally important. By charting a course for Muslims to solve the internal confrontations that divide their global community⁶, she clearly proves herself not as a Muslim scholar, but one of the leading female Muslim reformers of the contemporary world. Her par excellence expertises in this book manifold our sorrow because after we can know clearly that what we lost in her assassination. Another distinctive feature of this chapter is that as well as advocating for reconciliation, she also provides some concrete steps and policy recommendations, for example toleration of differences in the faith and a more solid commitment to democracy, for achieving this reconciliation among Muslim communities, and between Muslims and non-Muslims. "There has been enough pain. It is time for reconciliation" is the last sentence of her book, which I strongly recommend for students and researchers of global politics. It is tragic that Bhutto herself came to be a victim of this pain by sacrificing her life.

⁵ (p. 233)

⁶ (p. 279)