

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

January 9, 2008 at 7:59am

The imperfect storm

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From *Where I Stand*

There are two winds blowing around the globe. The first, fundamentalism, brings with it the guarantee of absolutism and security. The second, inclusiveness, brings with it the promise of a new kind of future, ambiguous certainly but expansive, at least. Those two winds clashed last week and the whole world is waiting to see which of them is stronger.

When Benizar Bhutto lay assassinated in Pakistan on December 28, 2007, news agencies around the world told the political story. Most of them missed completely the cultural story that underlies it.

The media concentrated almost entirely on the death itself. Bhutto was a political figure who had become a political icon and symbol of new life for the country. With her dead, there was plenty of death to go around.

There was, for instance, the death of peace that came with the sudden death of a popular political candidate in the already tension-filled country of Pakistan. Not only was Bhutto dead but so were over 40 other Pakistanis thanks to the riots that followed.

There was, too, the death of confidence in government as a whole. Over 400 government buildings, they told us, were torched in the chaos that followed the loss of Bhutto to the political life of the country, Polling places were destroyed, a symbol of the death of free elections, a clear statement of the gap

between the powerful and the powerless there.

We all saw, as well, the death of integrity on world-wide television. Two doctors -- one who had treated Mrs. Bhutto when she was admitted to the hospital, and one speaking as spokesperson for the government the following day -- gave separate and different accounts of her death. The first described the condition of the body and the bullet wounds that killed her. The second told the world that Bhutto was brought into the hospital "her eyes rolled back in her head and with no sign of pulse -- both signs of cardio-pulmonary arrest" brought on, we were supposed to believe, by striking her head on the rim of the sun roof of her car as it lurched forward after an explosion. Obviously one of those doctors was surely not telling the truth. Clearly honesty had died on a grand scale right before our eyes.

But another kind of death, largely unnoted in the public press, gave sign of the seriousness of the other four. With the death of Benizar Bhutto the hope of women for justice, for full human development, for recognition and participation in the public arena, died a bit everywhere, too.

Once prime minister of a secular government, Bhutto was now a candidate for re-election in a country tilting dangerously toward theocracy. When warned that her life might well be in danger, Bhutto's response, according to a BBC radio interview (Jan. 3, 2008) was that "no Muslim would kill a woman." Maybe not. Probably no good Catholic or Jew or Hindu or Buddhist would either. But being Catholic, or Muslim -- or member of any other orthodox religious ilk for that matter -- has little or nothing to do with it. Instead, fundamentalism, the first wind circling the globe, is the real problem.

The thought of a woman leader, meaning a leader who is a woman, simply cannot be stomached by religious fundamentalists. According to *The Washington Post*, (Dec. 28, 2007, "Bhutto Targeted by Many Militant Groups) "some members of Pakistan's intelligence establishment resented the idea of a woman leading a Muslim nation." After all, fundamentalists teach, God does not want women acting like real human beings -- making decisions, having ideas, developing leadership skills. The God who gave women the same brains that God gave to men apparently gave brains to women only to taunt them, to mock them, to make certain that they understand the depths of their human deprivation. To these people, women are meant to be the servants of men, not the leaders of men. Equal, they say, but "different." These people will do anything to still a woman's voice, to kill a woman's public influence.

CNN's special investigative report, "Lifting the Veil," is clear about what happens to women where the Taliban, Islam's fundamentalist sect, seeks to be -- pretends to be -- the real, the only, expression of Islam. In these places, women are imprisoned in their homes, allowed in public only with a man or at least heavily shrouded, forbidden to drive or travel alone, left uneducated, married off as children and abandoned on the streets when widowed. It's a bleak, desperate situation. "God's will," they say -- as have so many before them.

In theocratic governments, religions other than the state religions exist only by virtue of the fiat of the state and the state is devoted to maintaining the laws of the religion that underlies it. Too bad for everyone else. Like women.

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Absolutism is the old wind.

Inclusiveness is the new wind.

And this new wind is blowing, as well. Benizar Bhutto, although a most religious woman, was also the proponent of a secular democratic government. In the secular state, all religions enjoy equal protection under the law. All people are safe from the excesses of religion. This is the wind of justice and equality. And it is equally religious as well as comfortably secular.

This is the wind that comes with those who believe that God created all people with human rights, that God calls women, as well as men, to go on doing God's will, to continue co-creating the universe, to be moral agents. To vote, to minister, to teach, to think, to lead.

As a result, women everywhere, propelled by religion, are calling on both their religions and their governments to realize that as long as women can be suppressed, ignored, discriminated against, used, abused and made invisible -- all in the name of God -- humanity is only half human, government is suspect and religion itself is in danger of betraying itself.

Until the women's agenda is addressed, until things change for women, until the Benizar Bhuttos, the Hillary Clintons, and the Bishop Kathryn Jeffers-Shorri's of the world, leaders all, are the norm, not the exception, until domination and female invisibility stops being blamed on God, oppression will be the norm. Then nothing may change for women, true, but nothing will change for the rest of the world either. The fact is that whether they realize it or not, in the end, oppressors limit themselves as much as they limit those they oppress.

From where I stand, it seems clear that religions that only pretend to be religions ride on the past wind. Just look around you at all the women's groups rising up all over the world. In the face of religious fundamentalism, all of them -- like Benizar Bhutto -- pay the price, of course. But, has anyone noticed, these groups of women leaders are not going away.

Be not mistaken: There is clearly another wind blowing that no number, no kind, of assassinations can quell.

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