

The defeat of bigotry
By: Ayesha Ijaz Khan

Asma Jehangir's phenomenal electoral victory, leading her to become the first woman President of the Supreme Court Bar Association (SCBA), takes me back in time to another landmark in Pakistan's history. 1988 was the year that Pakistan returned to civilian rule after more than a decade of dictatorship. Benazir Bhutto was elected Prime Minister and the first woman to lead a Muslim country. I was a schoolgirl in Islamabad and thus ineligible to vote, but keenly interested in politics, I would ask everyone about their voting intentions. A conversation with our driver is one that I remember still.

"Vote kiss ko dalo gey Mumraiz?" I asked him.

"Bibi ji Sharif Nawaz ko," he responded, inadvertently reversing Nawaz Sharif's name.

"Benazir ko kyon nahin?"

"Bibi ji Islam mein aurat sarbarah nahin ban sakti," he said, as he dutifully drove me around town.

Having spoken to several others, I knew that Mumraiz' rationale did not reflect the views of most Pakistanis but there were nevertheless a significant number who did espouse similar thoughts. Mumraiz was a great guy, always polite, very respectful, not terribly hardworking, but one hundred percent trustworthy. He wasn't bigoted per se. He had just been fed the wrong information.

Misinformation and hate-mongering had become the unfortunate hallmark of the campaign against Asma. From accusations about her faith to raising fear about her allegedly suspect anti-judiciary pro-government aspirations, a belligerent negative campaign was orchestrated by her opponents. It didn't work though. Reminiscent of Fox News' savage propaganda against Obama, spinning stories about his Muslim faith, when in fact he had professed repeatedly to be Christian. Not that there is anything wrong in being Muslim, but it is difficult to win an election as a minority.

Most Americans, though not all, had seen through Fox News by the time 2008 rolled around. If there is anything Asma's election proves it is that most Pakistanis, similarly, have seen through our negative propaganda machines. Due credit must be given however to the leaders of the lawyers' movement, who, with the exception of Mr. Hamid Khan, were all supportive of Asma's election. Munir Malik, Tariq Mahmood, Ali Ahmed Kurd, all gentlemen without whose untiring efforts the Chief Justice would not have been reinstated, were squarely rooting for Asma. Aitzaz Ahsan, though less involved with the election, was also pleased with the result and did not offer support to Asma's opponents.

The support of these key men, founding fathers of the lawyers' movement, was crucial in securing Asma's victory, and helping her overcome the lies that were spread about her. In that sense, the lawyers' movement continues to be a beacon of hope and light for Pakistan. Not only did it stand against military rule, supremacy of rule of law and independence of the judiciary, but it has also displayed a propensity to introspect and self-correct. Like any important movement, it saw its peaks and troughs, and in the words of Mr. Kurd, "Asma's victory is a reaction" to the troughs.

Notwithstanding the strategic support of other influential and conscientious members of the bar, Asma's own hard work, courage and independent-mindedness over the years and through the darkest periods of Pakistan's history cannot be overlooked. Whether one looks domestically or to Philippines, India or Bangladesh, women have won elections on the back of sympathy votes after male members of the family have been martyred. Asma has done it all on her own. Admittedly, the SCBA is a professional body. Nevertheless, it is one that has wielded national significance and will continue to influence Pakistan's evolving democratic structures at this momentous time in our history.

As such, Asma's role as President SCBA may very well be greater than that of any other woman politician. Women have played an increasing yet limited role in Pakistan's politics since Musharraf's introduction of the reserved seats. Though not a bad way to boost female participation in politics, women who have

availed of these seats are either beholden to familial politics or more obliged to tow party lines for lack of their own constituencies. Asma's independence however cannot be curtailed by either of these considerations so the SCBA under her watch will surely be a potent force.

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