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Musharraf Rival Prepares for Return

By [CARLOTTA GALL](#) and SALMAN MASOOD

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates, Oct. 17 — [Benazir Bhutto](#), the Pakistani opposition leader and former prime minister, on Wednesday reaffirmed her determination to return to [Pakistan](#) the next day after an eight-year absence, despite threats from militants and pressure from the government to delay.

“This time tomorrow we’ll be on board the plane to Karachi,” she said at a news conference in this booming Persian Gulf city, which has been her home for much of the last decade.

Ms. Bhutto said she expected a “sea of people” to greet her. The southern port of Karachi, her home city, was already abuzz with excitement, as hundreds of supporters arrived from around the country, according to officials from her Pakistan People’s Party.

Ms. Bhutto, 54, served twice as prime minister in the 1990s, but left Pakistan under a cloud of corruption charges. She says that she is planning to run in parliamentary elections scheduled for January, but recognizes that she is returning to many unknowns, not only regarding her safety.

Her arrival was expected to reconfigure Pakistan’s already unsettled political landscape. It is certain to invigorate the opposition to Pakistan’s military leader, Gen. [Pervez Musharraf](#), who was re-elected president by national and provincial assemblies on Oct. 6, but faces constitutional challenges to his eligibility.

Ms. Bhutto’s homecoming would follow months of unfinished power-sharing negotiations with the general, who recently cracked open the door to her return by granting amnesty to Ms. Bhutto and others charged with corruption in recent years.

Both General Musharraf and Ms. Bhutto have explained the amnesty as a move to end the era of “political victimization and vendetta.” But it has been criticized not only by opponents of Ms. Bhutto, but also by many Pakistanis who want to see leaders held accountable before the law.

The amnesty faces its own legal challenges. If it is found to be unconstitutional, numerous corruption charges against Ms. Bhutto could be resurrected. She could even face jail.

There is no expectation, however, that she will meet the same fate as her rival opposition leader, [Nawaz Sharif](#), another former prime minister, who was deported almost immediately by the government in September after trying to return from exile.

At her news conference in Dubai, Ms. Bhutto was accompanied by her husband, Asif Ali Zardari, who served eight years in prison in Pakistan after she was removed from power in 1996, as well as their two daughters, Bakhtwar and Aseefa. None of them will accompany Ms. Bhutto on her trip home.

“Many threats have been made from left, right and center to try and intimidate not only me, but the people of Pakistan so they do not go to the airport to greet me,” Ms. Bhutto said.

A pro-[Taliban](#) Pakistani militant commander, Baitullah Mehsud, has threatened to send suicide bombers to attack Ms. Bhutto because of her strong support for the fight against terrorism. Ms. Bhutto responded with a strong warning herself, using words that few politicians in Pakistan would dare employ.

“I do not believe that any true Muslim will make an attack on me because Islam forbids attacks on women, and Muslims know that if they attack a woman they will burn in hell,” she said. “Secondly, Islam forbids suicide bombing.”

Shazia Marri, a member of the provincial assembly from Ms. Bhutto’s party, said a special bulletproof container truck had been prepared for Ms. Bhutto to travel from the airport to the tomb of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan.

The government has assured Ms. Bhutto that it will provide security for her procession through Karachi. Thousands of police officers and army rangers have been deployed, and bomb-disposal teams were sweeping the main roads.

The government tried to pressure her to delay her return because of the lingering constitutional challenges to General Musharraf’s election. But Ms. Bhutto said she had refused to renege on a promise to her party workers and voters. “Once I gave a date, I have to honor it,” she said.

She acknowledged that negotiating with General Musharraf had cost her some support and that even members of her own party had misgivings, warning that she was walking into a trap.

But Ms. Bhutto said she had to try to negotiate a transition to democracy. She took credit for pushing General Musharraf to agree to resign his military post and serve his next term as a civilian president, a step he committed to before the presidential elections.

She said that her party would continue to try negotiating with General Musharraf to move the country toward democracy, but that if the effort failed, the party would take to the streets. At the very least, General Musharraf can expect her to challenge him on a range of important issues.

While supporting the military fight in Pakistan’s tribal areas, where extremists from [Al Qaeda](#) and the Taliban have consolidated their stronghold, Ms. Bhutto also called for efforts to find a political solution there.

She called for reconciliation in Baluchistan Province, where the army is fighting an insurgency, and urged the government to release ethnic Baluch political prisoners.

Finally, she made a strong appeal for a peaceful transition to full democracy and the prelude to parliamentary elections.

“We don’t have to agree on everything, but we must agree that we will resolve our differences peacefully and politically,” she said. “We will resolve our differences by going to the people in an election and let the people decide the policies they want.”

In Karachi, portraits of Ms. Bhutto adorned the main squares and intersections. Outside Bilawal House, Ms. Bhutto's home, buoyant supporters arrived throughout the afternoon from the surrounding Sindh Province.

Masood Khan, 24, danced in the street. He said he was one of about 60 people from his hometown, Umarkot, who had walked for nine days to reach Karachi for the homecoming. "It was a token of our love and respect for the daughter of Sindh," he said. "No other leader can match her."

Carlotta Gall reported from Dubai, and Salman Masood from Karachi, Pakistan.

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