

(U) Pakistan: The Lady Ponders

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(C) Former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto may be contemplating a return to Pakistan but, lacking a pre-arrangement with the military, she faces arrest on her arrival. Bhutto's continuing attempts to negotiate her way back into mainstream politics have thus far failed to budge Chief Executive Musharraf from his view that neither she nor ousted and exiled former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif can be allowed a future political role. Publicly, their economic misdeeds and ethical shortcomings are used to justify barring their return. Privately, Musharraf and his generals fear their return could bring the politics of retribution under civilian rule.

(C) Bhutto and her supporters celebrated the April 6 supreme court decision setting aside her April 1999 conviction on corruption charges. The successful appeal overturned a verdict that led to her being sentenced to a five-year jail term. The court ordered a retrial, based largely on recently revealed wiretap evidence of interference in the judicial proceedings by an official of the then-Sharif government.

(C) Bhutto has proclaimed the supreme court's action lifted the major barrier to her leading the People's party in an election expected to take place by October 2002. But she must decide when to return and whether to chance a new trial or possible arraignment in any of five other corruption cases. Bhutto's strongest card is not provable innocence, street power, or the public's forgiveness for her failures in power, but the sympathy that Pakistanis usually accord to anyone believed to have been subject to the state's political victimization.

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