



After Bhutto: prospects for Pakistan

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In the immediate aftermath of the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, President Musharraf's most pressing dilemma is whether to reimpose the State of Emergency that he recently lifted in the face of considerable pressure from the West. The levels of civil disorder and anarchy in many of Pakistan's cities and towns which have followed Bhutto's death would appear to give cause for a period of emergency powers. The danger of imposing such powers, however, is that Musharraf would be accused once again of taking advantage of the security situation to strengthen his grip on government.

The next question for the President of Pakistan is what to do about the parliamentary elections, which were scheduled for less than two weeks hence on 8 January. Political leaders in the West have reacted to the horror of the assassination by calling

for Pakistan's return to democracy to be kept firmly on the rails. The Prime Minister of Britain, Gordon Brown, said that ". The terrorists must not be allowed to kill democracy in Pakistan". The US President, George Bush, condemned the incident as a "...cowardly act by murderous extremists who are trying to undermine Pakistan's democracy", and the President of the European Commission, Jose Manuel Barroso, used similar language in stating that "this was an attack against democracy"¹. The message for President Musharraf is clear: Bhutto's assassination must not be allowed to derail the democratic process, and progress towards elections must remain firmly on course.

In the meantime, various theories as to who is responsible for the murder of Pakistan's favourite daughter have sprung to the fore. The statements of Western leaders show that

they have already decided this was the work of “terrorists” and “extremists”. These are indeed the most likely perpetrators of the shooting and suicide bombing in Rawalpindi, namely Islamist militants based in the north-west tribal areas of Pakistan. The militants are sympathetic to – and in many cases directly supported by – Al Qaeda and the remnants of the Afghan Taleban. Reasons for coming to this conclusion are strong. Al Qaeda’s second-in-command, Al Zawahiri, is purported to have called for Bhutto’s death on her return to Pakistan in October². Similarly, two of the most significant “Pakistani Taleban” militants in the tribal areas, Baitullah Mehsud and Haji Omar, explicitly threatened to kill Bhutto should she return to Pakistan³. Indeed, Bhutto had barely set foot back in Pakistan in October 2007 when she narrowly avoided death in a suicide bombing in Karachi, which claimed the lives of 140 of her supporters.

The reasons for the Islamists’ dislike of Bhutto were many. Chief among them was her robust support for the US-led War on Terror in the region, and her frequent statements that one of her top priorities in returning to power would be rooting out terrorists and militants in the tribal frontier with Afghanistan⁴. She also represented a strongly secular democratic model for Pakistan, which is anathema to the Islamists. They would rather Pakistan became a Salafist theocracy along the lines of Taleban Afghanistan. As a person, Bhutto also displayed many factors that did not endear her to the Islamists, such as her Westernised and metropolitan background

which included many years studying and living in the US and Britain. She was also, of course, a woman. Musharraf had vacillated over allowing Bhutto back into the country after years in exile on corruption charges, but had relented late in 2007 under pressure from the West to make a return to parliamentary democracy in Pakistan. There is no doubt that Bhutto remained the single most popular political figure across many parts of Pakistan, and she would have stood a very good chance of forming the next government had the elections been free and fair.

The second conspiracy theory is that the government and Musharraf himself had a hand in Bhutto’s violent death. She had herself complained several times after her return to Pakistan that she was not being afforded the security protection from the army and police that she should have been given in the circumstances⁵. She also spent much of her time back in Pakistan under house arrest, along with other political leaders, during the period of Musharraf’s controversial State of Emergency. Having lost her father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, to a previous military regime in the late 1970s, Benazir was no friend of the military in Pakistan. There is no doubt that many in the military and intelligence hierarchy remain sympathetic to the Taleban Islamist militants and opposed to secular democrats such as Bhutto⁶. They also have very close links with militant parties such as the Jamaat-i Ulama-i Islam (JUI). JUI is close to, and has acted as the main political conduit for the militants in the tribal areas. It is highly

conceivable that rogue – or even officially sanctioned – elements in the military may have wished to remove Bhutto from the picture to ensure their continued dominance of power in the country.

The answer to the riddle may never be fully known, as has been the case with numerous previous twists and turns in Pakistan's violent history. It is notable that in this case, however, the government in Pakistan has taken the unusual step of publicly releasing a transcript of an intercepted phone call to the militant leader Mehsud, in which he seems to congratulate the "brave boys who killed her"⁷. This is probably a concerted attempt by the military government to squash military conspiracy theories at the outset, and to point the finger of suspicion unequivocally at the Islamists.

Where does Pakistan go from here politically? Unlike neighbouring India, Pakistan's experience since independence in 1947 has been one of stalled and stunted development of democratic institutions. This has meant that very few major political leaders have been able to emerge and flourish in the country, since there have been few elections to fight for and political parties have often been prohibited. With Bhutto's sudden removal from the scene, there is a notable paucity of popular leaders who could step into the breach. The person who most recently held office in a democratic government in Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif, is back in the country after his own enforced exile, although he had been saying his party would boycott the forthcoming elections.

This was on the grounds that they were unlikely to be free and fair, in his opinion. Since the death of his great rival, Bhutto, Sharif has been talking about a grand democratic alliance of the remaining political leaders which can unseat Musharraf in the polls⁸. This may be an astute tactical move, because Sharif is not a hugely popular leader across all parts of Pakistan and would probably struggle to secure a majority in a free election. Sharif has been joined in his call for a democratic alliance by the leader of the Islamic Jamaat-e Islami party, Qazi Hussain Ahmed⁹.

Other leaders on the political scene are similarly hampered by not having much of a national mandate. Bhutto's deputy in the PPP party, Makhdoom Amin Fahim, is not well known or particularly popular across the country. Two senior members of the judiciary, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry and Aitzaz Ahsan, have both shown themselves to be potential political heavyweights in standing up to the efforts of the military regime to curb the judiciary's powers¹⁰. But it is unlikely they would want to step fully into the political fray. The alliance of Islamic parties, the Mutta-heda Majlis-e Amal (MMA) is popular in the northwest of the country, but not across other parts of Pakistan. Its various leaders of constituent parties such as Jamaat-e Islami and JUI have found it difficult to agree on many issues, and are unlikely to be able to individually secure a major popular vote¹¹. Other political figures such as the former cricketer Imran Khan, or leader of the Karachi-based MQM party, Altaf Hussain, are popular in regional

pockets but are far from being significant players on the national stage.

Where Pakistan does look like India, and indeed like many other countries in Asia, is in the “cult of personality” aspect of its politics. For many, and particularly in the rural Sindh Province homeland of the Bhutto dynasty, the PPP was synonymous with Benazir, and before that with her father Zulfikar. These personalities were revered almost as saints among their local communities. In this respect there are uncanny parallels with the Gandhi family, in that, with the removal of its various leaders, the first instinct of many is to scout around the family for other potential leaders. In the case of the Bhuttos, the options appear very limited. Benazir’s husband, Asif Ali Zardari, is generally seen as a corrupt and unpopular man. Her mother, Nusrat, is too old and frail to become a political leader, and her three children are too young. (Benazir is thought to have not wanted her children to become involved in politics in the same way¹².) A former US diplomat and friend of Benazir’s during her US college days, Peter Galbraith, is among many who are now suggesting that the PPP will die along with its charismatic leader, in least in terms of being a major popular force in Pakistan’s politics¹³.

Inevitably when it comes to Pakistan’s politics, we must also look to the army. Unless Musharraf engineered Bhutto’s violent removal, he is now facing a very complex set of dilemmas. The message from the West is clearly that he must remain

on track to reinstall democracy, although some leeway may be allowed in the short term in restoring law and order. This might mean a temporary postponement of the polls, as it is hard to see how they could be held in the current climate of serious civil disorder. In the meantime he will have half an eye on the man who succeeded him in the post of Chief of Army Staff, when he finally agreed to shed his uniform in place of the mantle of civilian President. This is Ashfaq Kiyani, a hitherto “safe pair of hands”, who moved across from chief of the ISI intelligence agency. Kiyani has been loyal to Musharraf, and on-side in the cooperation with the US in fighting the War on Terror. But relationships are fickle in Pakistan’s politics, and it is not out of the question that Kiyani could ditch Musharraf, especially if the law and order situation demands tougher action. This could happen with the support of the US, if they felt that Musharraf was no longer able to contain the situation or did not intend to keep the country on the track to democracy¹⁴.

In these times of unrest, experience has shown that anything is possible. The immediate challenge for Pakistan is to avoid a complete descent into “civil war”, as many in the media are now describing the situation. A somewhat engineered nation from the start, Pakistan’s short history has been one of regional tensions and violence. The centre has always struggled to hold the peace, and with the addition of virtually unchecked Islamist violence into the mix, these are very dangerous times indeed for Pakistan and for the

whole region. Al Qaeda flourishes in situations in which the state is weak and traditional governmental authority is absent: this has been the case in Afghanistan, in Pakistan's Pashtun tribal belt and in other areas such as the Horn of Africa for many years. It may be Al Qaeda's intention to reduce Pakistan to this state of lawless Islamist anarchy. The challenge for the Pakistan government and its supporters in the

West is to hold the country and its society together and defeat the forces of extremism. Calls for a democratic alliance by some of Pakistan's political leaders offer a glimmer of hope amidst the misery of Bhutto's death. With these calls, it may just be the case that the actions of the militants have backfired and actually accelerated the move towards democracy in Pakistan.

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Notes

¹ The Times, 28 December 2007, p.7

² <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1944713/posts>, accessed 29 December 2007

³ Times Online, 28 December 2007,

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article3100052.ece>, accessed 29 December 2007

⁴ Christian Science Monitor, 28 December 2007,

http://customwire.ap.org/dynamic/stories/B/BHUTTO_WHODUNIT?SITE=MABOC&SECTION=HOME&TEMPLATE=DEFAULT&CTIME=2007-12-27-18-48-15, accessed 29 December 2007

⁵ The Guardian, 29 December 2007, pp.4-5

⁶ B R Rubin (2007) Saving Afghanistan. *Foreign Affairs* 86(1), Jan/Feb 2007, suggests that intelligence quoted by Western military officials in Afghanistan "provides strong circumstantial evidence that Pakistan's ISI is providing aid to the Taliban leadership shura [in Quetta]" (p.64)

⁷ The Guardian, 29 December 2007, p.5

⁸ New York Times, 29 December 2007,

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/29/world/asia/29cnd-pakistan.html?hp>, accessed 29 December 2007

⁹ Andhra News, 28 December 2007,

<http://www.andhranews.net/Intl/2007/December/28/Musharraf-regime-responsible-27638.asp>, accessed 29 December 2007

¹⁰ The Independent, 4 July 2007,

<http://news.independent.co.uk/world/asia/article2733261.ece>, accessed 29 December 2007

¹¹ Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment – South Asia, Internal Affairs, Pakistan, 16 May 2006

¹² The Times, 28 December 2007, p.11

¹³ The Guardian, 29 December 2007, p.8

¹⁴ The Guardian, 29 December 2007, p.5