

The assassination of Benazir Bhutto: A tragedy born of military despotism and anarchy

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The assassination of Benazir Bhutto heaps despair upon Pakistan. Now her party must be democratically rebuilt.

Even those of us sharply critical of Benazir Bhutto's behaviour and policies - both while she was in office and more recently - are stunned and angered by her death. Indignation and fear stalk the country once again.

An odd coexistence of military despotism and anarchy created the conditions leading to her assassination in Rawalpindi yesterday. In the past, military rule was designed to preserve order - and did so for a few years. No longer. Today it creates disorder and promotes lawlessness. How else can one explain the sacking of the chief justice and eight other judges of the country's supreme court for attempting to hold the government's intelligence agencies and the police accountable to courts of law? Their replacements lack the backbone to do anything, let alone conduct a proper inquest into the misdeeds of the agencies to uncover the truth behind the carefully organised killing of a major political leader.

How can Pakistan today be anything but a conflagration of despair? It is assumed that the killers were jihadi fanatics. This may well be true, but were they acting on their own?

Benazir, according to those close to her, had been tempted to boycott the fake elections, but she lacked the political courage to defy Washington. She had plenty of physical courage, and refused to be cowed by threats from local opponents. She had been addressing an election rally in Liaquat Bagh. This is a popular space named after the country's first prime minister, Liaquat Ali Khan, who was killed by an assassin in 1953. The killer, Said Akbar, was immediately shot dead on the orders of a police officer involved in the plot. Not far from here, there once stood a colonial structure where nationalists were imprisoned. This was Rawalpindi jail. It was here that Benazir's father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was hanged in April 1979. The military tyrant responsible for his judicial murder made sure the site of the tragedy was destroyed as well.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's death poisoned relations between his Pakistan People's party and the army. Party activists, particularly in the province of Sind, were brutally tortured, humiliated and, sometimes, disappeared or killed.

Pakistan's turbulent history, a result of continuous military rule and unpopular global alliances, confronts the ruling elite now with serious choices. They appear to have no positive aims. The overwhelming majority of the country disapproves of the government's foreign policy. They are angered by its lack of a serious domestic policy except for further enriching a callous and greedy elite that includes a swollen, parasitic military. Now they watch helplessly as politicians are shot

dead in front of them.

Benazir had survived the bomb blast yesterday but was felled by bullets fired at her car. The assassins, mindful of their failure in Karachi a month ago, had taken out a double insurance this time. They wanted her dead. It is impossible for even a rigged election to take place now. It will have to be postponed, and the military high command is no doubt contemplating another dose of army rule if the situation gets worse, which could easily happen.

What has happened is a multilayered tragedy. It's a tragedy for a country on a road to more disasters. Torrents and foaming cataracts lie ahead. And it is a personal tragedy. The house of Bhutto has lost another member. Father, two sons and now a daughter have all died unnatural deaths.

I first met Benazir at her father's house in Karachi when she was a fun-loving teenager, and later at Oxford. She was not a natural politician and had always wanted to be a diplomat, but history and personal tragedy pushed in the other direction. Her father's death transformed her. She had become a new person, determined to take on the military dictator of that time. She had moved to a tiny flat in London, where we would endlessly discuss the future of the country. She would agree that land reforms, mass education programmes, a health service and an independent foreign policy were positive constructive aims and crucial if the country was to be saved from the vultures in and out of uniform. Her constituency was the poor, and she was proud of the fact.

She changed again after becoming prime minister. In the early days, we would argue and in response to my numerous complaints - all she would say was that the world had changed. She couldn't be on the "wrong side" of history. And so, like many others, she made her peace with Washington. It was this that finally led to the deal with Musharraf and her return home after more than a decade in exile. On a number of occasions she told me that she did not fear death. It was one of the dangers of playing politics in Pakistan.

It is difficult to imagine any good coming out of this tragedy, but there is one possibility. Pakistan desperately needs a political party that can speak for the social needs of a bulk of the people. The People's party founded by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was built by the activists of the only popular mass movement the country has known: students, peasants and workers who fought for three months in 1968-69 to topple the country's first military dictator. They saw it as their party, and that feeling persists in some parts of the country to this day, despite everything.

Benazir's horrific death should give her colleagues pause for reflection. To be dependent on a person or a family may be necessary at certain times, but it is a structural weakness, not a strength for a political organisation. The People's party needs to be refounded as a modern and democratic organisation, open to honest debate and discussion, defending social and human rights, uniting the many disparate groups and individuals in Pakistan desperate for any halfway decent alternative, and coming forward with concrete proposals to stabilise occupied and war-torn Afghanistan. This can and should be done. The Bhutto family should not be asked for any more sacrifices.

P.S.

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* Tariq Ali's book The Duel: Pakistan on the Flightpath of American Power is published in 2008
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