

# Who killed Benazir Bhutto?

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The assassination of Benazir Bhutto has raised two important questions. Who killed her and why? And what happens next to the Pakistan People's Party and by corollary to Pakistani politics?

Most Pakistanis are by instinct inclined to believe that the "agencies" did it. This is the easy explanation for anything that happens in this country which is either inexplicable or unpalatable. All political assassinations in Pakistan remain inexplicable since the truth about them has never been investigated or investigated but not made public. But the truth of Ms Bhutto's assassination may also be subliminally unacceptable to many Pakistanis because a religious or "Islamist" element may be at its unpleasant core.

This response is also partly due to the ubiquitous role of the "agencies" in ordering Pakistan's political contours since the 1980s, including making and unmaking governments and elections. So we can hardly be blamed for suspecting the "agencies" or clutching at half-baked theories. Certainly, the political opposition to President Pervez Musharraf would like everyone to think so. It suits the politicians' purpose because it discredits the Musharraf regime and seeks to exploit the widespread anger and outrage at the killing of a popular leader to try and overthrow him.

But if the "agencies" have done this at President Musharraf's bidding, why is no one asking about their motives for doing so, or whether this suits him in any way, considering that it is likely to provoke a popular movement to undo his regime? Indeed, why is no one wondering whether there is some non-agency link between Ms Bhutto's assassination and the assassination attempts on the lives of President Musharraf (two), the former corps commander of Karachi, Ahsan Saleem Hayat (one), the former prime minister Shaukat Aziz (one) and the former interior minister Aftab Sherpao (two)? Surely, the "agencies" did not

target these gentlemen.

Of course, Ms Bhutto did not make any explanations easier following the assassination attempt on her on 18 October when she pointed to “remnants” of the Zia regime in the Musharraf administration, including some former “agency” people. Apparently, she had been given to understand as much, but by whom and why we will never know.

There may also have been an element of political opportunism in her accusations at the time. She was trying to distance herself from President Musharraf to regain her credibility because most Pakistanis were unhappy at the prospect of a “deal” between her and him. Indeed, she was seen as being let off the hook regarding the corruption cases against her in exchange for agreeing to work with him at a time when he was terribly unpopular both for his political blunders regarding the judiciary and also for his pro-US stance on the “war against terror”. Most Pakistanis saw this war an unjust American war and not a just Pakistani war.

Later, however, Ms Bhutto saw the writing on the wall and changed tack. She started to say that the biggest threat to Pakistan lay in religious extremism and terrorism, a clear allusion to the Al Qaeda network that was trying to lay down roots in Pakistan’s tribal areas as part of its global strategy after Iraq to reclaim Afghanistan and make Pakistan a base area for Islamic revolution.

Shortly before she returned to Pakistan, *Daily Times* reported a statement by Baitullah Mehsud, an Al Qaeda-Taliban warlord based in Waziristan, saying that he had trained “hundreds of suicide bombers” and was determined to kill Benazir Bhutto because she was an American agent. The story was based on an interview given to *Daily Times* by a sitting member of the Pakistan senate who has been a conduit for Masud’s statements and who had recently met him.

The story was not denied for two weeks and disregarded until the assassination attempt provoked widespread outrage in Pakistan and refocused attention on Al Qaeda. But sections of the media sympathetic to Al Qaeda’s anti-American

aims and objectives now quickly pounced on *Daily Times* and accused it of wilfully carrying an erroneous report. The senator was dragged to a TV studio and made to recant his statement and much was made of the motives of *Daily Times* in airing such a story. Later, a statement from Baitullah Masud was floated denying involvement in the assassination attempt on October 18. Last month, however, Baitullah Masud gave up pretences and formally announced himself as the head of the Taliban Movement of Pakistan.

Why is it difficult to believe that the same Islamist network that tried to eliminate President Musharraf, Shaukat Aziz, Aftab Sherpao and Benazir Bhutto on October 18 may be responsible for her murder on December 27? The first three have overtly been involved in the “war against terror” while Ms Bhutto had pledged many times to wipe out the extremists and terrorists if she was returned to power. All were seen as “American agents” or “puppets”.

In the case of President Musharraf, it was later revealed that “rogue elements” in the “agencies” or “forces” may have been involved as Al Qaeda “supplementaries” or “accessories” in the assassination attempts on his life. Indeed, in many of the Al Qaeda attacks on the armed forces and paramilitary forces, especially those in Islamabad and Rawalpindi, low-level “insider” elements with contacts with the Lal Masjid, which was part of the Al Qaeda network, are known to have been involved. How else can one explain the Al Qaeda attacks on ISI busses in Islamabad in which civilian employees of the agency have been killed?

Clearly, Al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan doesn't just comprise Arabs and Uzbeks and Tajiks. It also comprises Pakistanis; and among such Pakistanis it comprises Pathans and Punjabis and possibly Urdu speakers who constitute the Pakistani Taliban. Certainly, it is known that a number of Pakistani sectarian and jihadi Sunni organisations have joined the Al Qaeda Network after the government launched efforts to disband them since the “peace process” started with India. So Al Qaeda is now as much a Pakistani phenomenon as it is an Arab or foreign element.

There is not much room for doubt on this score

any more. Ayman Al-Zawahiri, the number two Al Qaeda man, has already gone public in his exhortations to Pakistanis to overthrow the Musharraf regime. Indeed, last September Bin Laden declared a jihad against the Musharraf regime. Now, following the assassination of Ms Bhutto on December 27, an Al Qaeda spokesman and Afghanistan commander Mustafa Abu Al-Yazid telephoned the Italian news agency AKI to make the claim that his organisation had killed Ms Benazir Bhutto "because she was a precious American asset". This should have reminded Pakistanis that their country is in the midst of a global war against religious extremism. But the tragedy is that it hasn't.

There is no inconsistency between what Ms Bhutto said on October 18 after the assassination attempt on her life about remnants of the Zia regime gunning for her and what she said in Rawalpindi on December 27 about terrorists and extremists targeting her minutes before one of them succeeded in eliminating her. Now Al Qaeda's primary targets are President Musharraf and Maulana Fazlur Rehman and its sole objective is to destabilise Pakistan and sow the seeds of anarchy by scuttling its halting transition to a moderate democracy.

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**P.S.**

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