

Benazir: Casualty of US-sponsored 'Democracy' in Pakistan

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Benazir Bhutto's shocking and unconscionable assassination has plunged Pakistan into crisis. The streets continue to simmer with rage, the Musharraf regime desperately tries to claim that Benazir's death was an accident not an assassination and Pakistan's elections are mired in uncertainty. Bush was quick to declare that the assassination was the work of 'extremists', a further justification for the 'war on terror'. The Musharraf regime echoed this with the claim of evidence of an al-Qaeda plot to kill Benazir. Much of the media, in India as well as internationally, has anointed Benazir as a 'martyr for democracy'. But, for people of the subcontinent, whether in Pakistan or in India, this explanation is too superficial to be satisfactory.

Benazir's killing is cowardly and condemnable, and even those who had been her sharpest critics are united in abhorring her death. However, to portray Benazir Bhutto's death as a heroic sacrifice for the cause of democracy is far from the truth. It was an open secret that Benazir returned as part of a US-brokered deal. In return for a reprieve from corruption charges, Benazir was to bail out the embattled Musharraf regime facing a raging pro-democracy movement, by providing a democratic Prime Ministerial façade. The simplistic story peddled by Bush and Musharraf that 'evil Islamic terrorists' targeted Benazir because she represented modernity, democracy and the values of the enlightened West has proved difficult to swallow within and beyond Pakistan. Instead it is now widely recognised that it was Benazir's part in the US design which put her in the line of fire. In fact, many in Pakistan believe that the military-intelligence establishment of Pakistan headed by Musharraf engineered the assassination which took place in the garrison town of Rawalpindi. Al-Qaeda's outright denial of any responsibility for the killing, as well as the flimsy attempts by the military dictatorship to cover up the killing and pass it off as an accident only strengthen this suspicion.

Benazir was no icon of 'democracy', she was in fact a symbol of, and also a tragic casualty of the Iraq-Afghanistan-style US-sponsored 'democracy', a democracy that was meant to legitimise rather than challenge a US-approved dictatorship. The weak content of the democracy represented by Benazir and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) is also underscored by the feudal and dynastic features shared with Indian political parties. The leadership of the PPP has now been bestowed upon her young son, (on the premise that the party was Benazir's property to be disposed of in keeping with her will), while her husband will act as regent.

For the US ruling establishment, it's a 'heads I win, tails you lose' situation. The assassination of Benazir may be a blow to its design – but not for long, it is already looking to capitalise on the new situation and use the current chaos as a pretext for intensified US military and political in Pakistan. The US strategic design in the region is no secret – for long, the US has been claiming that the Pashtun tribes' territories bordering Afghanistan are a 'safe haven' for the al-Qaeda, and has been declaring its intention to send in troops there with or without Musharraf's consent. If Musharraf becomes more of a liability than an asset for the US, it always has the option of dumping him in favour of some other more presentable candidate from within Pakistan's ruling class. The US will also expect India to be its partner in any new chapter of the 'war on terror' in Pakistan.

Within the US establishment, there are sections that, in view of Musharraf's increasing loss of credibility, would like the US to keep its options open in Pakistan rather than tying itself down to Musharraf. US presidential candidate Hillary Clinton represents such an opinion. She made it clear that she was not asking Musharraf to step down – but she has suggested a possibility of the Pakistani military's role in the killing and recommended an international investigation into Benazir's death with the participation of the UN, Afghanistan and India. Just as in the case of Iraq, there is no fundamental difference among the Democrats and the ruling Republicans over the US use of Pakistan as a base for its 'war on terror', just minor differences over the shape of US intervention and the choice of allies. Hillary Clinton's remarks also display the characteristic imperialist arrogance and condescension for the people of developing countries. Referring to the lawyers' movement for democracy, she said, "When you have people demonstrating in the streets who are wearing coats and ties, you know, those are the people we should be standing with." No doubt, if the people demonstrating on the streets of Pakistan, India, Iraq or Latin America do not have the right kind of clothes on their back, their demand for democracy cannot be said to merit US support!

For India, Benazir's assassination is yet another reminder of the dangers of being the darling of US imperialism, and of the farce of US-sponsored 'democracy' and 'war on terror'. Musharraf's dictatorship received US approval and backing because it was said to be a frontline partner in the 'war on terror', yet, the result is that terror and the tragedies have become a daily reality in Pakistan. Now, in Pakistan's hour of crisis, we must vigilantly and vehemently resist any attempts by the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Government to be part of any form of US intervention in Pakistan. The democracy that the people of Pakistan are striving for is something deeper and more enduring – and that democracy can be achieved only if the US leaves Pakistan well alone and its stooge Musharraf steps down. These would be the first painful steps towards a potential restoration of some measure of democracy to Pakistan.

P.S.

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