

Pakistan After Benazir's Assassination: An Interview

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Q: Let's start with the tragedy of Bhutto assassination. Today, international media remind us she was the first woman to become the PM of an Islamic country, she was a democratic leader, etc. Nonetheless, she was the scion of a feudal family, which was primarily responsible for making Pakistan an atomic power and she was known for the authoritarian control of her party. Looking back, how do you judge Benazir Bhutto?

A: Having first known Benazir Bhutto from high school in Karachi, and then later in Cambridge (Massachusetts), I am deeply saddened by her assassination. But, although the international media paint her as someone who could have led Pakistan into the modern age, the truth is very different. Her two tenures as prime minister were a nightmare of autocratic government and mis-governance. Billions disappeared from foreign aid. A Swiss court found her guilty of money laundering in 2003. Ms. Bhutto owned mansions and palaces across the world. She even tried to steal land from my (public) university to feed the rapacious appetite of her party members.

Even during school days, Benazir thought she had been born to rule. More importantly, she made not the slightest effort to change the feudal character of Pakistani politics and society. The Bhuttos own vast tracts of agricultural land in Sindh that is worked upon by serfs. Although she promised to bring democracy to Pakistan, after returning to Pakistan, Ms. Bhutto made clear that for a few table scraps she would be happy to team up with General Musharraf under the hopelessly absurd US plan to give our military government a civilian face. Her party, the Pakistan Peoples Party was her fiefdom. She appointed herself as "chairperson for life". Reflecting the mindset of a feudal princess, she even named her successors to be male members from her family: her 19-year

son, who is a student at Oxford and knows nothing about Pakistani culture, as well as her phenomenally corrupt husband, initially known as Mr Ten Percent and later as Mr. Thirty Percent.

Q: Was Ms. Bhutto a model for Pakistani women?

A: She was courageous and single-minded. And she showed that a woman could be the head of a conservative Islamic state. Nevertheless, it is hard to see what she wanted beyond personal power. Although she said that she was fighting for grand causes, I'm still trying to figure out what they were. She certainly did nothing for Pakistani women during her two stints in power and left untouched the horrific Hudood laws, according to which a rape victim needs to produce 4 witnesses to the act of penetration (else she could be punished for fornication). Nor did she try to overturn the Pakistani blasphemy law that prescribes death as the minimum penalty for those convicted of insulting the prophet of Islam or his companions. As for democracy: she had been desperate to do a deal with Musharraf who dangled over her head the many corruption cases that she was charged with. But he proved too clever for her and she was forced into the opposition.

In foreign policy, she played footsie with the army. It could do whatever it liked, including making nuclear weapons, sending Islamic militants into Kashmir, and organizing the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban. In 2002 she regretted having signed the document authorizing funds for the funding Taliban forces for seizing Kandahar. Ms. Bhutto makes an excellent martyr. In her death she will doubtlessly play a more positive role than when alive.

Q: Al Qaeda was immediately blamed for Bhutto assassination. However, many people hated her: Musharraf, the Army, and the infamous ISI, which in 1990 removed Bhutto from power after she had replaced General Hameed Gul, the man who invented the Taliban. Do you believe that Al Qaeda was really responsible for killing Benazir Bhutto? Who is going to gain from Bhutto's death?

A: There are different possibilities and much confusion. But some facts are certain. There definitely were gunshots, and this was followed by a suicide blast. Now, I do not think that

suicide bombers can be bought with any number of rupees. Only a religious fanatic lured by heavenly rewards would blow himself up. Therefore Al-Qaida, the Taliban, or other Islamic jihadist groups are strong possibilities. They always hated Bhutto, but even more after she announced in Washington that, if elected prime minister, she would fight them even more vigorously than Musharraf. Of course, rogue elements of Pakistan's intelligence agencies, who are also strong Islamists, and who lie deeply hidden within the establishment, could also have done it. They have a stock of suicide bombers available to them, as evidenced by the success they have had in organizing suicide attacks upon army commandos as well as their own colleagues.

So did Islamists of one or the other flavour do it? Maybe, but the waters have been muddied by the government. First, publicly available photographs and videos show a modern-looking gunman accompanying the suicide bomber. He fired three shots, heard by all present, at least one of which hit Bhutto. Some say that there was a second sharpshooter in a building too. On the other hand, the government initially insisted she died from concussion and not a bullet wound - an obvious lie immediately refuted by those in the same car as Bhutto. Second, in just an hour after the assassination, the police washed away all the bloody evidence with water hoses. So, it is quite possible that non-Islamists in the government have somehow used brainwashed suicide bombers, trained in mosques and madrassas, to do their dirty job. But, as in the JFK murder, the truth will never be known.

As for the gainers and losers: Islamist groups saw Bhutto as a tool of America that would be used against them, and a leader who could secularize Pakistan. Plus, she was a woman and popular. But Musharraf and his political party, the PML(Q), have also gained because a political rival has been eliminated. The losers are those Pakistanis who wish for a secular, modern Pakistan and not one that is run by mullahs. Although she never delivered on her promises, her followers never lost faith.

Q: There is a lot of concern about the future of Pakistan. How real is the threat of an Islamic

takeover, in your opinion?

A: It has already been taken over! Twenty five years ago the Pakistani state began pushing Islam on to its people as a matter of policy. Prayers in government departments were deemed compulsory, punishments were meted out to those who did not fast in Ramadan, selection for academic posts required that the candidate demonstrate knowledge of Islamic teachings, and jihad was propagated through schoolbooks. Today government intervention is no longer needed because of a spontaneous groundswell of Islamic zeal. But now the state is realizing that it shot itself in the foot. The fanatical jihadists it created have turned against it. It is supreme irony that the Pakistan Army - whose men were recruited under the banner of jihad and which saw itself as the fighting arm of Islam - is now frequently targeted by suicide bombers who are fighting a jihad to bring even stricter Islam. It has lost a thousand or more men fighting Al-Qaida and the Taliban.

The pace of radicalization has quickened. There are almost daily suicide attacks. This phenomenon was almost unknown in Pakistan before the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Now it is common in major cities as well as tribal areas. The targets have been the Pakistan army, police, incumbent and retired government leaders, and rival Islamic sects. But this is just the tip of the iceberg; we'll see much more in years ahead.

Q: Ideally, what do you want to see happen in the next few weeks?

A: I want Musharraf to go - resign or somehow be removed, preferably without bloodshed. I want the independent judiciary restored, a new neutral caretaker government installed for overseeing free and fair elections, and then elections that would decide upon the new parliament and prime minister. This will not immediately solve Pakistan's fundamental problems - army dominance, maldistribution of wealth, religious fanaticism - but it would get Pakistan on the track to democracy instead of the self-destruction it is racing towards.

Q: People in Washington are increasingly frustrated with Musharraf's counterterrorism efforts, however they think there are no

alternatives to Musharraf. What do you think about this?

A: The Americans have tunnel vision. They want lackeys like Musharraf who do their bidding, although here too there is deception at work. They know, but choose to forget, that Pakistani military leaders, Musharraf included, are the makers of the jihadist monster. In 1999, after Musharraf launched the secret Kargil operation in Kashmir, the United Jihad Council celebrated him as a true fighter for Islam. After 9/11 such praises disappeared, but under his leadership the army still covertly supported jihadist groups and the Taliban in Kashmir and Afghanistan.

Musharraf is extremely unpopular now and the Americans will have to dump him at some point. It is hard to find a pro-Musharraf person anywhere in the country except in the top business circles and the top army leadership. Until recently he ran both the army and the government himself, with the connivance of a rubber-stamp Parliament put in place through rigged elections. When the courts were about to rule that he could not legally be president, Musharraf chose to suspend the constitution and impose emergency rule. He dismissed the Supreme Court and arrested the judges, replacing them with judges who obey his every command. He blocked all independent television channels, and punished the news media for disparaging him or the army. His police arrested thousands of lawyers and pro-democracy activists. He ordered that civilians be tried in closed military courts. This was necessary, he said, to save Pakistan from a rapidly growing Islamist insurgency. But he released 25 Islamic extremists on the day that the judges were arrested. In spite of all this, George W. Bush called Musharraf "a democrat at heart".

The Americans have shot themselves in the foot by supporting the army consistently for decades. They have lost credibility and respect among Pakistanis. Everybody laughs when they hear that America wants democracy for Pakistan. In this situation, even if Musharraf goes and Gen. Kayani (the new army chief) takes over, the best that America can hope for is for the status quo. This is sad, because America is a great country with many virtues. If only they could get over their

hangup of wanting to run the world! It's an impossible task anyway.

Q: In Pakistan what is the man on the street thinking?

A: Almost everyone holds the government responsible for the assassination. Tragically, suicide bombings are not condemned with any particular vigor. There is no strong reaction against the mullahs, madrassas, and jihadis. Perhaps people are afraid to criticize them because this might be seen as a criticism of Islam. Interestingly, in all the street demonstrations I have gone to after the Bhutto assassinations, there was no call for cracking down on extremists. Yesterday I met the lone taxidriver who thought the Islamists did it.

Q: What could be an effective way to fight Al Qaeda and the Taleban in Pakistan?

A: To fight and win this war, Pakistan will need to mobilize both its people and the state. The notion of a power-sharing agreement between the state and Taliban is a non-starter; the spectacular failures of earlier agreements should be a lesson. Instead the government should help create public consensus through open forum discussions, proceed faster on infrastructure development in the tribal areas, and make judicious use of military force - troops only, no air power. This should become every Pakistani's war, not just the army's, and it will have to be fought even if America packs up and goes away. But, as long as Musharraf is president, it will be impossible to get popular support for the war. If presented with a choice between Musharraf and the Taliban, the overwhelming majority of Pakistanis would want the latter - although I am sure they would regret it later.

Q: Let's talk about Pakistan's nukes. There a lot of concern about the possibility that nuclear weapons could end up into the hands of Islamic fundamentalists. Early in December the Washington Post revealed that a small group of U.S. military experts and intelligence analysts convened in Washington for exploring strategies to secure Pakistani nukes if the Pakistani regime falls apart. Their conclusions were very scaring, as, - there are no palatable ways to forcibly ensure

the security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons. What do you think about this?

A: The government says there is absolutely no danger of loose nukes. Pakistan has been sending serving officers of the Strategic Plans Division, which is the agency responsible for handling nuclear weapons, to the United States for training in safety measures (PAL's locking devices, storing procedures, etc). But there's no way of telling if this will be effective.

Extremists have already penetrated deep into the army and the intelligence agencies. We now see repeated evidence: for example, last month an unmarked bus carrying employees of the Inter Services Intelligence [Pakistan's secret intelligence], was collecting employees early in the morning. It was boarded by a suicide bomber who blew himself up killing 25. It was an inside job.

And now there are many other such examples, such as that of an army man killing 16 Special Services Group commandos in a suicide attack at Ghazi Barotha. A part of the establishment is clearly at war with another part. There are also scientists, as well as military people, who are radical Islamists. Many questions come to mind: can there be collusion between different field-level commanders, resulting in the hijacking of a nuclear weapon? Could outsider groups develop links with insiders? Given the absence of accurate records of fissile material production, can one be certain that small quantities of highly enriched uranium or weapons grade plutonium have already not been diverted? I do not know the answers. Nobody does.

P.S.

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* Pervez Hoodbhoy is professor of nuclear and high-energy physics, and chairman of the department of physics at Quaid-e-Azam University in Islamabad.