

The Culture & Conflict Review
Vol. 2, No. 1 (January 2008)



The Assassination of Benazir Bhutto

Alec E. Metz

Pakistan, for such a young nation, has an extremely complicated history. Its identity has largely been forged by opposition; opposition to Hindu-majority India, opposition to foreign intervention in Afghanistan, opposition to corrupt elected officials, and then opposition to the military strongmen who overthrow them. In the latest episode, the leader of the democratic opposition, Benazir Bhutto, has been assassinated by forces opposed to Western-style democracy.

On the evening of December 27th, while leaving a rally earlier postponed due to security concerns, Benazir Bhutto, former prime minister and leading contender for the job again, was fired upon in Rawalpindi. A bomb blast, presumably of the suicide variety, followed shortly thereafter. This is a travesty for not only her family but for the nation of Pakistan and U.S. efforts in the area. She was the fourth in her family to die prematurely.

The Pakistani government's assertion that al Qaeda was responsible¹ has lessened the anger felt towards Mr. Musharraf.² Many Pakistanis seem to hold the government responsible for the gaps in security that allowed the assassins so close, while the government seems to have since shifted the blame to Baitullah Mehsud, a Taliban commander from Southern Waziristan for plotting the attack, for which the government furnished a transcript of an alleged conversation between Mehsud and another plotter. Mehsud has since denied responsibility for the attack.³ The government went on to claim that Bhutto was not killed by bullets or the bomb, but when her head struck the bullet-proof sun roof cover of her limousine.⁴ Recently, the PPP has claimed that the cause of death was not an actual gunshot wound, but a laser beam.⁵ Her husband denied a state request for

¹ "Bhutto killing blamed on al-Qaeda," *BBC News*, 28 December 2007

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7163307.stm> (28 December 2007).

² Laura King, "World wary as nation burns," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 December 2007

<<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2007/12/28/1198778702573.html>> (28 December 2007).

³ "Al Qaeda militant did not kill Bhutto: spokesman," *ABC News*, 29 December 2007

<<http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2007/12/29/2128806.htm>> (10 January 2008).

⁴ "Bhutto murder: the key questions," *BBC News*, 31 December 2007

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7165892.stm> (1 January 2008).

⁵ "Bhutto assassin 'used laser beam'," *The Daily Telegraph*, 3 January 2008.

<http://www.news.com.au/dailytelegraph/story/0,22049,23001028-5001021,00.html> (5 January 2008).

an autopsy. As all sorts of theories are thought through, we may never know the truth.

Benazir Bhutto was a controversial prime minister. Daughter of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was himself executed by the last military dictator of Pakistan, she ruled the country during its initial support for the Taliban. Additionally, corruption was widespread during her administrations (1988-1990 and again from 1993-1996), to the point where her husband Asif Zardari became known as "Mr. Ten Percent," for his levy on contracts.⁶

Despite that, however, she was notable for being the first female head of an Islamic state in 1988, showing that Islam and modern liberalism could co-exist.⁷ She rolled back some of the more draconian laws of her predecessor General Zia ul-Haq (although not the barbaric *Hudood* Ordinances).⁸ This is not what makes her killing especially tragic, however; it is what she would probably have become that adds the most grief.

For all her faults, Bhutto was that nation's best chance for a return to democracy and her death was "...a serious blow for the re-emergence of democracy in Pakistan and the country's return to stability," according to the International Crisis Group.⁹

Intelligent and pragmatic, she returned to Pakistan earlier this year among bombings and then martial law to see the restoration of democracy in that country, presumably with herself at the head. Until he declared a state of emergency, she held talks with Pervez Musharraf in hopes that a peaceful democratic end to the military dictatorship could be achieved. And in spite of the constant threats and intimidation towards herself and her followers, she spoke out against the Islamicist militants plaguing her nation.¹⁰ Though we are not entirely convinced she would have been much more effective at preventing the level of militancy in NWFP from increasing.

⁶ John F. Burns, "Bhutto Clan Leaves Trail of Corruption in Pakistan," *New York Times*, 9 January 1998 <<http://www.samsloan.com/benazir.htm>> (28 December 2007), and Bronwen Maddox, "Can democracy survive, and who will take Bhutto's place?" *The Times*, 28 December 2007 <<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article3100417.ece>> (28 December 2007).

⁷ Caitlin E. Anderson, "Bhutto Refutes 'Sexist' Criticisms in Speech," *Harvard Crimson*, 10 November 1997 <<http://www.thecrimson.com/article.aspx?ref=123487>> (28 December 2007).

⁸ Human Rights Watch, *Crime or Custom? Violence Against Women in Pakistan*, 1999 <<http://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/pakistan/index.htm>> (28 December 2007).

⁹ "Media Release: Statement on the assassination of Pakistani opposition leader Benazir Bhutto," International Crisis Group, Brussels, 27 December 2007.

¹⁰ "Benazir Bhutto in her own words," *BBC News*, 28 December 2007 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7162403.stm> (28 December 2007).

In the immediate term, her death threw Pakistan into chaos. Riots followed in every major Pakistani city. Elections, originally scheduled for the beginning of January, have been rescheduled for February 18. Nawaz Sharif, leader of the Pakistani Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and former prime minister, announced his party would boycott the elections,¹¹ before deciding to participate.¹² Flights, some rail routes, and most government services were frozen. Musharraf declared three days of mourning, and has remained surprisingly quiet since. Riots erupted across the country, most notably in Bhutto's home province of Sind, but also further afield in the NWFP and the Punjab, where her party has not traditionally enjoyed the greatest support, indicating that more than her party's base see her death as a crime against democracy.¹³ Musharraf's government responded by putting paramilitaries and rangers back on the streets, with shoot-to-kill orders.¹⁴

Members of the Pakistani Muslim League-Qaid-i Azam (PML-Q) Party (Musharraf's base of support) reportedly entered into hiding for a short time, fearing for their own lives.¹⁵ Many blame them, and Musharraf in particular for the lack of security that cost Bhutto her life¹⁶ and resulted in a lethal bomb blast at a PML-N rally earlier the same day.¹⁷ The Taliban and al Qaeda, who have threatened to kill her numerous times, seem to have been somewhat ignored.¹⁸

¹¹ "Bhutto buried amid mass mourning," *BBC News*, 28 December 2007

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7162236.stm> (28 December 2007).

¹² "Nawaz Sharif warns against rigging in elections," *Daily Times*, 8 January 2008

<http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2008%5C01%5C08%5Cstory_8-1-2008_pg7_14> (8 January 2008).

¹³ Carlotta Gall, "Bhutto Buried as Government Orders Virtual Lockdown," *New York Times*, 29 December 2007

<<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/29/world/asia/29pakistan.html?pagewanted=1&r=1>> (28 December 2007).

¹⁴ "Dozens killed in Pakistan protests," *Al Jazeera*, 28 December 2007

<<http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/2E2DCAF2-6DD2-41E7-B8F3-B6E513EC1A9E.htm>> (28 December 2007).

¹⁵ "PML-Q leaders go underground," *Daily Times*, 28 December 2007

<http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2007\12\28\story_28-12-2007_pg1_5> (28 December 2007).

¹⁶ Bronwen Maddox, "Can democracy survive, and who will take Bhutto's place?" *The Times*, 28 December 2007 <<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article3100417.ece>> (28 December 2007).

¹⁷ "4 die in attack on PML-N supporters," *Daily Times*, 28 December 2007

<http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2007\12\28\story_28-12-2007_pg7_8> (28 December 2007).

¹⁸ "Bhutto killing blamed on al-Qaeda," *BBC News*, 28 December 2007

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7163307.stm> (28 December 2007), and "Al-Qaeda blamed for Bhutto killing," *Al Jazeera*, 28 December 2007

<<http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/40A2DD05-7BCA-4445-ADBE-8E0851F3C366.htm>> (28 December 2007).

Nawaz Sharif, now the most prominent democrat, did what can only be described as brave and went to the hospital where Bhutto was taken, vowing that “the nation will take revenge...”¹⁹ Musharraf is undoubtedly extremely reticent to let Nawaz Sharif assume command as prime minister (which he probably would have won on January 8, should the elections have gone forward as planned), which may explain his decision to postpone elections and allow Bhutto’s Pakistani Peoples Party (PPP) to regroup.

The PPP has regrouped now, in true feudal South Asian style. Mentions were made of both Benazir’s husband and sister Sanam Bhutto taking over the top job, but the former’s reputation and the latter’s lack thereof made them both divisive candidates.²⁰ In the end, Benazir’s son, Bilawal Zardari, who has recently changed his name to Bilawal Bhutto, has been named head of the party. That at 19 he is too young for parliament by six years is apparently not a problem; his father will manage the day-to-day affairs of the party while Bilawal finishes his studies at Oxford.²¹ It remains to be seen whether the rest of the PPP will tow the line, or split.

During the elections delay, Islamist militants are using the occasion to further attack Musharraf as a tyrant. Even in his response to Bhutto’s murder, it was clear that Musharraf held back from deploying regular army units; possibly for fear that their loyalties and abilities may come under question. Recently, a retired army major was apprehended for masterminding a suicide bombing in which eight airmen were killed in the NWFP.²² While the corps commanders appear loyal to Musharraf, the rank-and-file of the military have had a tough go the last few years, and may be unable to restore calm and stability in Pakistani cities, let alone tribal territories.²³ Deploying security for the elections February 18 will be a severe test.

¹⁹ Qtd., “It’s state terrorism, says Nawaz,” *Daily Times*, 28 December 2007
<http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2007\12\28\story_28-12-2007_pg7_3> (28 December 2007).

²⁰ “Analysis: What next for Pakistan?” *Al Jazeera*, 28 December 2007
<<http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/FC505120-05AA-49B8-8FC6-94100CF8A212.htm>> (28 December 2007).

²¹ M. Ilyas Khan, “Bhutto successors face tough challenge,” *BBC News*, 30 December 2007
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7165255.stm> (31 December 2007).

²² “Suicide bomb ‘mastermind’ arrested in Pakistan,” *Reuters*, 9 January 2008
<<http://www.reuters.com/article/topNews/idUSISL11253820080109?feedType=RSS&feedName=topNews&pageNumber=1&virtualBrandChannel=0>> (9 January 2008).

²³ M. Ilyas Khan, “Bhutto Killing: What next for Pakistan?” *BBC News*, 27 December 2007
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7162194.stm> (27 December 2007).

The transition that U.S. policy makers had envisioned between Musharraf and Bhutto is now null and void, and many are unclear as to what may follow. Until the dust has settled in Pakistan, and the elections take place, that nation will remain very tense²⁴. Pakistan suffered 770 deaths from 60 suicide bombs in 2007, according to the Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies, and they are continuing with frightening regularity.²⁵ At least two have already occurred in 2008, and eight moderate tribal elders have been assassinated in the NWFP as well.²⁶ Finally, the PPP and the PML-N have vehemently warned the government that election fraud will not be tolerated.²⁷ Should Musharraf be seen attempting such, the situation could descend into chaos.

The situation in Pakistan presents an ominous future for developments in Afghanistan. The two nations' levels of security are tied together. If chaos erupts in Pakistan, areas that enjoy relative security in Afghanistan will suffer a similarly anarchic turn. Taliban and Islamist militants frequent the porous border region and use the North-West Frontier Province in Pakistan as a refuge between attacks on ISAF and NATO forces in Afghanistan.²⁸ The increasing levels of insecurity in Pakistan's cities provide another reason for concern. If security can be ensured throughout the election process and beyond February 2008, developments in Afghanistan may not remain in threat.

What is clear is that Pakistan will have a rough time ahead. Entering the traditionally communally divisive month of Muharram²⁹ a suicide bombing in Lahore, in front of the stately and majestic Panjab State Supreme Court, has

²⁴ Zahid Hussain, "Analysis: Lahore bomb heralds bloody run-in to Pakistan's election," 10 January 2008 <<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article3165202.ece>> (10 January 2008), and M. Ilyas Khan, "Pakistan vote delay won't curb instability," *BBC News*, 2 January 2008 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7168739.stm> (3 January 2008).

²⁵ Nicholas Schmidle, "On the Campaign Trail in Pakistan," *Salon.com*, 10 January 2008 <<http://www.slate.com/id/2181778/entry/2181794/>> (10 January 2008). Claude Salhani, "Analysis: Pakistan's grim year," *United Press International*, 28 December 2007 <http://www.upi.com/International_Security/Emerging_Threats/Analysis/2007/12/28/analysis_pakistans_grim_year/9769/> (28 December 2007).

²⁶ Sadaqat Jan, "Pakistan: Militants Kill 8 Tribal Elders," 7 January 2008 <<http://ap.google.com/article/ALeqM5gN9azhQVGrJL4JPw2NeIOczvAbfgD8U0TRNO0>> (8 January 2008).

²⁷ Farhan Bokhari and Quentin Peel, "Rigged elections could destroy Pakistan, warns Bhutto's son," *Financial Times*, 9 January 2008 <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/164addba-be9c-11dc-8c61-0000779fd2ac.html>> (9 January 2008), and "Nawaz Sharif warns against rigging in elections," *Daily Times*, 8 January 2008 <http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2008%5C01%5C08%5Cstory_8-1-2008_pg7_14> (8 January 2008).

²⁸ "Pakistan, Afghanistan in tandem," *Washington Times Editorial*, 11 January 2008.

²⁹ M. Ilyas Khan, "Lahore bomb raises sectarian questions," *BBC News*, 10 January 2008 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7181042.stm> (10 January 2008).

killed 22 and wounded 60.³⁰ The murder of Benazir Bhutto was the culmination of Pakistan's *annus terribilis*, and an omen that 2008 could be the decisive year for Pakistan. With Benazir gone, the future looks bleak indeed.

Alec E. Metz is a Research Fellow for the Program for Culture & Conflict Studies at the Naval Postgraduate School.

³⁰ "Pakistan suicide blast 'kills 22,'" *BBC News*, 10 January 2008
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7180424.stm> (10 January 2008).