

ISAS Brief

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469A Bukit Timah Road
#07-01 Tower Block, Singapore 259770
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isasijie@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



Benazir Bhutto (1953-2007) Assassinated – Pakistan in Turmoil

Ishtiaq Ahmed¹

The general elections in Pakistan, scheduled for 8 January 2008, have been postponed till 18 February 2008. This decision was taken by the Pakistan Election Commission in the wake of the assassination of twice prime minister of Pakistan and leader of the Pakistan People's Party (Parliamentarian) [PPP (P)], Benazir Bhutto. Rioting broke out in many parts of Pakistan, but especially in the province of Sindh to which Ms Bhutto and her family belong. The destruction of government buildings and infrastructure has been staggering. The offices of the Election Commission, polling booths, the voters' list, police stations, petrol pumps, railway stations and railway carriages, trucks and private cars have been torched by angry mobs. Sindh has been practically burning. The government deployed the military in Sindh with orders to shoot on sight. Pakistan could be on the brink of a civil war.

The dastardly crime took place after she had addressed a mammoth public meeting in Rawalpindi on 27 December 2007 to solicit votes for the general elections announced for 8 January 2008. Rawalpindi is less than 10 kilometres from Pakistan's capital, Islamabad. The headquarters of the Pakistan Army is located in Rawalpindi as are the head-offices of its intelligence services. Rawalpindi has aptly been described as a garrison town. Yet, the writ of the state has been flouted many times in recent months in Pakistan. Only on 30 November 2007, the present author was in Islamabad to attend a conference when a suicide bomber blew himself up and a number of policemen and ordinary citizens. Apparently, the culprit wanted to enter the area where the top generals of the army have their residences. When he was intercepted, he decided to kill himself and the police.

Ms Bhutto was fully aware of the dangers and even claimed to have received information that attempts on her life will be made, but she was a daring individual and probably a daredevil one. Just some months before her return to Pakistan in October 2007, after living eight years in self-exile, she said in an interview, "No real Muslim will kill a woman, because Islam forbids it. Such a person will burn in hell forever." But the terrorists struck her immediately upon her arrival to Pakistan. The convey, comprising cars, trucks, police jeeps, motorbikes and thousands of people on foot to take her from Karachi Airport to the mausoleum of the founder of Pakistan, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, was attacked viciously with two bomb blasts by a suicide bomber. The utter savagery and mayhem it caused left at least 149 people dead and more than 500 injured. She survived unhurt on that occasion.

¹ Professor Ishtiaq Ahmed is a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies, an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be contacted at isasia@nus.edu.sg.

So, one can only wonder what convinced her to go out in the public and address gatherings. At the time of the first attack, she said in a press conference that she had received intelligence from a friendly country that three men in the government – two holding ministerial positions, and the third, a powerful civil servant – were planning her murder and that she had informed President Musharraf about it. Now, an American journalist has revealed that he had received an email from Ms Bhutto in which she complained that proper security and protection were not being provided to her and, if she became a victim of a terrorist attack, Musharraf would bear the responsibility.

President Musharraf and his ministers have rejected all such allegations. Musharraf actually advised her not to return to Pakistan yet because he claimed to have intelligence suggesting that she would be attacked if she did. We should also remember that Islamist terrorists had already made three attempts on Musharraf's life. Among those who took part in those attacks were some lower ranking air force personnel. Therefore, Musharraf's complicity in her murder does not make any sense, especially because both were reportedly moving towards some power-sharing deal brokered by the United States.

Al Qaeda declared in a message put up on an Islamist website that her death brings to an end "America's most precious asset in Pakistan" but denied having a hand in her killing. Ms Bhutto had made several statements that from the Al Qaeda point of view are anathema. She said that she would actively take part in the war on terror and help root it out of Pakistan. Even more provoking was her statement that her government would allow the Americans access to the mastermind behind Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme, Dr Abdul Qadeer Khan, who is currently kept in house detention under pressure from the United States. Even Musharraf, who has worked closely with the Americans, had turned down the request to let them interrogate him. In ideological and political terms, therefore, Ms Bhutto was a greater challenge to the Islamist extremists.

Such pronouncements by Ms Bhutto undoubtedly earned her the wrath of not only Islamists but ultra-nationalist and jingoistic elements in the Pakistan military and intelligence establishment. Musharraf has not been in full control of these apparatuses for quite some time, although the military, as a whole, remains loyal to him. The Pakistan government has accused Baitullah Mahsud for ordering the assassination of Ms Bhutto, which a spokesperson for Mr Mahsud has denied. There are some reports that rouge elements of the Special Services Group, an elite commando formation in the Pakistan Army, may have been involved in shooting her down. The government has claimed that Ms Bhutto died of a deep wound she received when she fell in her car and not from gunshots.

Among the disgruntled sections of Pakistani society, especially the Sindhis, who form the second largest ethnic nationality in the Pakistani federation, the Musharraf government is being perceived as responsible for creating conditions that led to the assassination of Ms Bhutto. The Sindhis have a long catalogue of grievances against the federal government of Pakistan, which they allege is dominated by the military recruited mainly from the dominant Punjab province. Ms Bhutto's father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was overthrown by General Zia-ul-Haq in 1977. Later, he was hanged on allegations of having ordered the murder of a political opponent by a Supreme Court in which four judges, all Punjabis, found him guilty, while the other three non-Punjabis did not. In Sindhi percepts, it was a case of judicial murder.

Ms Bhutto's brother, Murtaza, was gunned down to death some years ago. Punjabi police officers were blamed for that murder though his wife and children alleged that Ms Bhutto's

husband, Asif Ali Zardari, was involved in that crime. Mr Zardari has also been blamed for massive corruption during Ms Bhutto's two stints as prime minister. Both she and her husband are alleged to have robbed the Pakistan exchequer of a staggering amount of US\$1.5 billion. Anyhow, the assassination of Ms Bhutto has created a family of Sindhi martyrs. Popular perceptions are always swayed when someone is cruelly killed.

If the government is not able to bring the situation under control quickly, other parts of Pakistan may go up in flames. Almost all the political parties opposed to General Musharraf decided to boycott the election when the news of Ms Bhutto's assassination became known. Now, they have agreed to take part in the election scheduled for 18 February 2008. There can be no doubt that several months of agitation in Pakistan during 2007 against the authoritarian policies of General Musharraf have greatly weakened him and the parties which support him.

The United States and its allies are greatly worried that if the current wave of instability does not ebb soon, the Islamists may stage a takeover. In that case, control over Pakistan's nuclear arsenal could pass into the hands of extremists who could threaten regional and world security. This doomsday scenario is not very likely to materialise at present because the top military generals are not Islamists and their hold over the military apparatus remains firm. There are also reports from the United States' media that the Americans have succeeded in gaining control over Pakistan's nuclear arsenal – something which the Pakistan government has strongly denied.

The forthcoming elections would probably be the most divisive since 1971 when East Pakistan broke away from Pakistan. The PPP (P) is expected to benefit from the huge sympathy wave currently sweeping Pakistan.

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