

A COUNTRY ON THE BRINK

By GARHI KHUDA BAKHSH
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The assassination of Benazir Bhutto seems to assure a turbulent election campaign and strengthen the likelihood of an unstable government

FOR some time Pakistan has been the main contender for the title of most dangerous country on earth. Since the murder of Benazir Bhutto on December 27th its claim has been strengthened. People are right to be worried. But is the forthcoming, postponed election doomed to be a violent shambles? And is the country itself doomed to disintegrate, fall into the hands of Islamists or lose control of its nuclear weapons to jihadists? Not necessarily. In the short run, at least, much turns on the rival interpretations of how Miss Bhutto died that day in Rawalpindi.

It went like this. A clean-shaven young man, wearing a white shirt, black waistcoat and sun-glasses, presses through the adoring scrimmage around Miss Bhutto. Almost within arm's reach of the sports utility vehicle from which the twice and would-be future prime minister waves to the crowd, as she campaigns for an election due to take place on January 8th, he pauses. Behind him is a taller figure, apparently bearded, his face shrouded in a white head-dress. Then the clean-shaven man points a pistol at Miss Bhutto, and three sharp cracks ring out.

Viewed in slow motion, on a film broadcast by Britain's Channel 4 three days after the event, Miss Bhutto's trademark white headscarf is flipped up, as if by a sudden gust. An instant later two men standing on the back of the vehicle duck their heads and Miss Bhutto slumps. Swirling chaos ensues, as a suicide-killer, believed to be the shrouded youth, pulls the pin from his bomb.

If genuine, the film seems to corroborate the first official description of Miss Bhutto's murder: that she was shot in the head just before a suicide-bomber dispatched himself, her killer and about 20 others. The leaders of Miss Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP), the country's biggest, concur. The party's spokeswoman, Sherry Rehman, who was with Miss Bhutto when she died and then bathed her corpse, says she saw entry and exit wounds in the head. But the government has since changed its version of the killing. It now asserts that Miss Bhutto, whose body was buried without an autopsy, was not shot at all; she died, according to the new version, as a result of hitting her head on the lever of the car's sun-roof while trying to escape the blast.

Baffling, almost irrelevant, as this dispute may seem, it added fuel to four days of violent rioting by PPP supporters, mostly in the southern province of Sindh, home of the Bhuttos. Indeed many Pakistanis, who are deeply mistrustful of the government of President Pervez Musharraf, their recently demobbed ruler, consider this revision suspicious. It suggests to them that the government is somehow blaming Miss Bhutto for her own assassination—or even ridiculing her.

Whatever the truth, the conviction is widespread in Pakistan that the government had a hand in killing her. After all, she had accused a cabal of army spies and Mr Musharraf's political henchmen of plotting to kill her. And that was before a previous attempt on her life, in October, in which two suicide blasts killed more than 140 PPP supporters during a home-coming rally for her in Karachi. Her return that day marked the end of an eight-year self-imposed exile and the start of her campaign to serve a third term as prime minister.

Within hours of Miss Bhutto's death, Sindhis began to rampage. Angry mobs tore through every town in the province, burning cars, looting shops, screaming in grief for the unrivalled leader of Pakistan's main political dynasty. From within high-gated compounds rang the shrill of women's screams. In other provinces the response was less histrionic. By the time this first frenzy was over, 174 banks, 22 trains and 13 electoral offices had been looted or set alight. Over 50 people had been killed. The government puts the damage at \$200m. Other responses were more measured, but also discouraging. On December 31st the main Karachi stockmarket, a high-performing symbol of the strong economic growth of Mr Musharraf's era, opened nearly 4.5% down. The rupee also dived, as capital inflows, on which much of the growth has been based, dried up like a desert stream.

For now, the violence has faded, even if the pessimism has yet to lift. On January 2nd it was announced that the election would be postponed to February 18th, immediately after the month-long Shia festival of Muharram, a time associated with mourning. This followed much haggling among the political parties. They had started to recalculate their electoral prospects even before Miss Bhutto's corpse had been interred on December 28th—at a vast Moghul-style mausoleum that she had had built for her father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, another former prime minister, executed for supposedly sanctioning the death of an opponent. In a country where no party can win an outright majority, and the army alternately rigs the elections and seizes power, political planning is a perilous enterprise.

Musharraf opts for Fabian tactics

In the final months of 2007, however, a fairly solid consensus had emerged about the outcome of the election. True, Mr Musharraf's blundering efforts to retain the autocratic powers he had seized nearly a decade ago had brought political turmoil to Pakistan. But rough polling, and an assessment of Mr Musharraf's best interests, suggested that the PPP and the former ruling party, the Pakistan Muslim League (Q), which is loyal to the old soldier, would emerge as the two biggest parties, neither of them with a majority. They might then have formed a coalition government, which Miss Bhutto plainly hoped to lead.

That result, minus Miss Bhutto, is now the very best that Mr Musharraf can hope for. More likely, say some pundits, is that Pakistanis will vote in huge numbers for the PPP, in sympathy for its loss. That might give the PPP an outright majority, which is no doubt why Mr Musharraf's loyalists were so eager to have the election postponed, though their demand was ostensibly to allow time to repair polling stations and replenish ballot

papers. A sympathy vote could boost Pakistan's second party, led by Nawaz Sharif. The main rival in much of Punjab, Pakistan's biggest province, to Mr Musharraf's loyalists, Mr Sharif demanded that the vote be held on time. But the Election Commission, supposedly independent but in fact controlled by Mr Musharraf, ruled that this was impossible.



The PPP's new acting leader, Asif Zardari, who is Miss Bhutto's widower, will act as regent while his co-leader, the couple's 19-year-old son Bilawal, completes his studies at Oxford University. Mr Zardari had also wanted the vote to be held as planned. In agreeing to a delay, he is likely to have won some quid pro quo for the PPP. Yet Mr Zardari has meanwhile accused the former ruling party of killing his wife, and thereby made clear that the PPP is not to be trifled with. With a reputation for corruption and thuggery, earned during Miss Bhutto's two terms in power, he has reminded his main rivals that the PPP currently controls the streets.

It is a point worth making. A long delay, the PPP reasonably feared, would increase Mr Musharraf's agents' ability to manipulate the election in his favour. They have, after all, rigged all the four previous polls presided over by their master, who has also staged two coups. On December 31st PPP officials announced that Miss Bhutto had been due to hand a 200-page dossier on Mr Musharraf's latest vote-rigging schemes to some American congressmen.

Meanwhile, the dispute continues over who killed Miss Bhutto. The government says it was al-Qaeda. At least, that is the label it has attached to the alleged culprit, a Taliban warlord called Baitullah Mehsud, who holds sway over a terrorist haven along the north-western frontier with Afghanistan. Mr Zardari, like most Pakistanis, scoffs at this. "I think soon the chickens are going to lay their eggs and we will blame them on al-Qaeda," he says. "Al-Qaeda has nothing to fear. Why would they fear us? Are they our political opponents?"

Mr Mehsud has denied having anything to do with the killing—in fact, he has called for an international investigation into the atrocity, though he may have to be satisfied with the announcement that a team of British detectives will assist with an investigation into Miss Bhutto's death. He is certainly capable of the crime. Last month it was reported that he had been elected leader of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, a new association of tribally based Islamist militias in the frontier area. Flush with Afghan drug money, and a dream of global *jihad*, these groups have gained unprecedented power during America's six-year war on terror. At America's expense, estimated at around \$5 billion, 100,000 Pakistani

troops have been sent to quell them. Yet they now control a vast and spreading swathe of territory. Mr Mehsud's fief, in particular, is reported to have become a hub for Pakistani and foreign jihadist terrorists. Intelligence agents say they include members of Jaish-e-Muhammad, a Pakistani outfit formerly trained by the army to fight in Indian-held Kashmir. This group is alleged to have supplied dozens of suicide-bombers for attacks in Pakistan in recent months.

One more unexplained murder

Miss Bhutto may have been killed by the same men. A Western-educated woman, who applauded America's war on terror, she was presumably not to their taste. And indeed, shortly before she returned to Pakistan, Mr Mehsud was alleged to be plotting to kill her. Similarly, within hours of Miss Bhutto's assassination, the government released what it claimed was a recording of Mr Mehsud discussing the atrocity over the telephone. It features a voice, allegedly Mr Mehsud's, asking who had killed Miss Bhutto, then rejoicing to learn that the killers were his own men. To some disinterested listeners, however, this sounded phoney. Surely Mr Mehsud would have kept closer control over such an audacious and meticulous ambush? Moreover, on the tape he is heard giving what appears to be a precise description of his position. Why, then, had the army apparently not tried to kill him?

For that matter, it is not entirely obvious that Mr Mehsud would have wanted Miss Bhutto dead. There are richer jihadist prizes in Pakistan—not least Mr Musharraf, whose removal Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden's deputy, has called for. Mr al-Zawahiri had not bothered to denounce Miss Bhutto, a discredited female opposition politician. Yet the campaign to dispatch Miss Bhutto was carried out with an unusual thoroughness and persistence. On the eve of an election that her party had a fair hope of winning, it is not hard to imagine that Miss Bhutto's assassination was politically motivated.

Despite the investigation that Mr Musharraf has promised, the truth may never out. Pakistan's political history is crammed with unexplained killings. They include the violent deaths of Miss Bhutto's two brothers, Murtaza and Shah Nawaz, whose bodies also lie in the family's meringue-like mausoleum in Garhi Khuda Bakhsh. (Mr Zardari was charged with ordering the death of Murtaza in a storm of police gunfire in 1996. He was later exonerated.) Another mystery surrounds the death of General Zia ul Haq, the dictator who toppled, then hanged, Miss Bhutto's father. One day in 1988 the general's plane, which was also carrying America's ambassador to Pakistan, fell to earth.

Bring on the doomsayers

On December 28th thousands of sombre men, black scarves bound around their arms, converged on Garhi Khuda Bakhsh. Many had served the lofty Bhuttos. Passing the charred carcass of a train and several gutted government buildings, they streamed in to see Miss Bhutto buried, shouting “Hang Musharraf!” as they came. “This is civil war. It is worse than Iraq,” said one mourner, Zulfikar Ali Mirza, a black-clad PPP stalwart with

an assault rifle wedged beside the seat of his car. “I see no more map of Pakistan. She was the only link between the four provinces. Now there is no future for Pakistan.”

It is Pakistan's particular misfortune that its progress tends to be measured against exaggerated doomsday prophecies such as this. Three are most popular. The first, which is as old as Pakistan itself, decrees that the place will fragment (history is not encouraging: born of partition in 1947, the country lost its eastern component in 1971). The other two are more recent. One is that Pakistan, like neighbouring Iran, will fall to Islamists—perhaps even of Mr Mehsud's vicious kind. A related fear is that terrorists will get hold of the country's nuclear arsenal. All three nightmares are very unlikely in the short term, but may be increasingly possible.

To be clear, Pakistan is bitterly divided. Punjab dominates the economy and the army. In other parts of the country military rule—which Pakistanis have known for over half their history—is considered Punjabi rule. Every decade or so, in Sindh, Baluchistan and North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), Punjabi troops are dispatched to quash an insurgency. The army is currently attempting this task in both Baluchistan and NWFP, on several fronts. NWFP has always been so rebellious that no Pakistani government has dared to call it by its logical name, Pushtunistan, for fear of rallying the Pushtun tribesmen who live there. But the army is still quite strong enough to prevent any chunk of Pakistan from splitting off.

The other prophecies are more sobering—given the current security crisis on the Afghan frontier, and a history of institutional Islamism within the army itself. The American-backed campaign in north-western Pakistan has gone badly. It has almost certainly spawned much more radicalism and terror than it has ended. Baker Atyani, head of the al-Arabiya television office in Islamabad, says he receives two or three videotapes every week from local and foreign jihadist groups along the frontier—many more than he can broadcast. Clearly, Pakistan has a long-term problem with militancy. And the prevalence of jihadist sympathies within the army also remains a concern. For whatever reason, many soldiers on the frontier are demoralised: at least several hundred have surrendered to untrained bandits. Nonetheless, despite these concerns, a strong majority of Pakistanis remain moderate.

It is right to worry about these, perfectly imaginable, calamities. And yet, again and again, governments at home and abroad, civilian and military, have let such nightmares distract them from dealing with Pakistan's pressing political problems. Force, the army's preferred solution, is invariably insufficient to provide solutions. For example, so long as marginalised Baluchis, whose vast western province is Pakistan's richest in minerals but poorest per person, do not receive a fair share of state spending, they will periodically rise up. Instead of slapping them down—as Mr Bhutto did in the 1970s, and Mr Musharraf does now—the government will one day have to give them a fair deal.

Even in easier times, improving Pakistan's government would be a huge undertaking. To get Pakistanis to place the slightest trust in their state may take decades. And even the most sensible policies may fall short in the end. Pakistan is in a dangerous and unstable

neighbourhood. It has also been miserably served by its politicians, and today the choice before the voters looks as bad as ever before.

Yet it is at least abundantly clear that Pakistan's rotten politics and vagabond institutions will never be put right by an army dictator, including an unreformed Mr Musharraf. On seizing power in 1999, he promised to reduce corruption, fight extremism, strengthen civil institutions and do a host of other good things. In one or two respects, he has scored impressive hits: on his watch, for example, Pakistan has enjoyed steady economic policies and some useful reforms. But, like all dictators, Mr Musharraf has increasingly subordinated his good intentions to his wish to cling to power, with disastrous results.

After his second coup, last November, Mr Musharraf abolished the press freedoms of which he had long boasted. He also sacked 60 potentially disobedient judges, and appointed many biddable idiots in their places. The damage thus done to Pakistan's judiciary, which was rotten to begin with, will take years to undo. He has also quietly dropped the architect of Pakistan's impressive economic performance, his former prime minister, Shaukat Aziz.

No more generals, please

Given this record, it is hard to imagine what beneficial role Mr Musharraf might yet play, whether he is in uniform or not. He speaks of his desire for a “democratic transition”. The first test of his sincerity will be whether Pakistanis are allowed a fair election next month. Then all eyes will be on the kind of government that emerges. In a country in a state of shock, predictions are perhaps unwise. Yet it seems as likely as not that the PPP and its pro-Musharraf rivals will, after all, form a government together, though it is unclear who might lead it.

Disappointing though she was, tainted by corruption and only dubiously democratic (she was “life chairperson” of her party), Miss Bhutto was her country's only national leader. Pakistan may not have realised how much it would miss her, until now she is gone.