

Bhutto assassination heightens threat of US intervention in Pakistan

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With Pakistan erupting in violence over the assassination of its former prime minister Benazir Bhutto and amid conflicting accounts as to both the identity of her assassins and even the cause of her death, official Washington and the American mass media have coalesced around a version of events that has been crafted to suit US strategic interests.

Without any substantive evidence, the crime has been attributed to Al Qaeda, while Bhutto herself has been proclaimed a martyr both in the struggle for democracy in her own country and in the US “global war on terror.” Meanwhile, the government of President Pervez Musharraf has been exonerated. There is ample reason to question this “official story” on all counts.

The obvious intent is to turn this undeniably tragic event into a new justification for the pursuit of US strategic interests in the region. In the week leading up to the assassination, there have been a number of reports indicating that US military forces are already operating inside Pakistan and preparing to substantially escalate these operations.

At this point, there is no proof as to the authorship of the assassination. The military-controlled government of President Musharraf claims to have intercepted a phone call in which an “Al Qaeda leader” congratulated his supporters for the killing. Yet web sites that have claimed responsibility for previous Al Qaeda terrorist acts have not done so in relation to the Bhutto killing.

Then there is the question as to how Bhutto died. In the wake of numerous eyewitness accounts that she had been shot before a bomb blast ripped through the crowd at an election campaign rally in Rawalpindi, the Pakistani Interior Ministry issued three conflicting accounts: the first saying that she died from a bullet wound to the neck, the second that she was killed by shrapnel from the bomb and a third claiming that she had fractured her skull against a door handle while ducking down into the sunroof of her vehicle to dodge either the bullets or the explosion. How the government reached this last novel conclusion is unclear, as no autopsy was conducted on Bhutto’s body.

A spokesperson for Bhutto’s Pakistan People’s Party, Farooq Naik, called the Musharraf government’s shifting story “a pack of lies” and insisted that the real cause of death was sniper fire. If indeed the Pakistani politician was shot to death by a sniper in Rawalpindi, the historic garrison town which is headquarters to the country’s military, suspicion would shift even more sharply towards the government or elements within its powerful military-intelligence apparatus.

This is already the predominant popular sentiment within Pakistan itself. As *Philadelphia Inquirer's* columnist Trudy Rubin reported from the country, "Just about every Pakistani with whom I spoke blamed her death not on Al Qaeda, but on their own government—and the United States."

And, there is irrefutable evidence that Bhutto herself saw the government, rather than Al Qaeda, as the main threat to her life.

The *New York Times* Friday cited one Western official who met with the Pakistani politician the day before she was killed. He said, according to the *Times*, that Bhutto "complained that while the militants represented a threat, the government was as much a threat in its failure to ensure security. She suggested that either the government had a deal with the militants that allowed them to carry on their terrorist activities, or that President Musharraf's approach at dealing with the problem of militancy was utterly ineffective."

And in Washington, Bhutto's American lobbyist, Mark Siegel, released an email from Bhutto that she had asked him to make public if she were assassinated. The message was sent shortly after the attempt on her life last October—a massive bombing that claimed the lives of nearly 140 people during a procession in Karachi following her return to the country. She had publicly accused the Pakistani military-intelligence apparatus of having a direct hand in this attack.

In her email, she said that she would "hold Musharraf responsible" if she were killed in Pakistan. "I have been made to feel insecure by his minions," she wrote of the Pakistani military strongman.

Detailing the refusal of government officials to provide her with elementary security, Bhutto wrote, "There is no way that what is happening in terms of stopping me from taking private cars or using tinted windows or giving jammers [to detonate roadside bombs] or four police mobiles to cover all sides could happen without him."

In an interview on CNN, Siegel commented: "As we prepared for the campaign ... Bhutto was very concerned she was not getting the security that she had asked for. She basically asked for all that was required for someone of the standing of a former prime minister. All of that was denied her."

Asked by CNN's Wolf Blitzer whether Bhutto had herself not been reckless, Siegel responded, "Don't blame the victim for the crime. Musharraf is responsible."

Meanwhile, Senator Joseph Biden, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and a candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination, held a press conference in Iowa in which he revealed that he had personally interceded with Musharraf to ask for specific security procedures to protect Bhutto, but his requests were ignored.

"The failure to protect Mrs. Bhutto raises a lot of hard questions for the government and security services that have to be answered," Biden said. When asked if he believed the Pakistani government had deliberately placed Bhutto in harm's way, he backed off, however, claiming he did not know what security was in place when Bhutto was killed.

The military-Islamist connection

The lines separating Al Qaeda—or, to be more precise, radical Islamist elements in Pakistan—from the country’s military-intelligence apparatus are hardly firm. Pakistan’s military-controlled regimes have encouraged and rested upon support from Islamist forces—as a counterweight to the working class and the left—ever since General Zia-ul Haq seized power and carried out the hanging of Benazir Bhutto’s father, then Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, in 1979. The military regime—and in particular its intelligence arm, the ISI—further cemented these ties during the US-backed war against the pro-Soviet regime in Afghanistan in the 1980s. It was then that the ISI and the CIA worked to build up the movement that became known as Al Qaeda and collaborated directly with Osama bin Laden.

That these ties still exist is without question. US military commanders have repeatedly complained that their Pakistani counterparts have warned Al Qaeda elements of impending US operations. That the Musharraf government or elements within the military could utilize Islamist elements to carry out such an assassination—or facilitate their committing such a crime—is obvious.

As for a motive, Musharraf and his main base of support, the military command, have a clear one. They had no interest in sharing state power—and access to both graft and billions of dollars in US aid—with the Pakistan People’s Party. Benazir Bhutto was twice elected prime minister in the 1990s—and twice removed. Each of these changes in power involved bitter conflicts between her government and hostile elements in the top brass of the Pakistani military and the ISI.

Now Musharraf’s principal rival for political power is dead and her party in disarray. He remains the principal figure upon whom Washington depends in Pakistan, a reality reflected in the insistence by the Bush administration, the media and the leading Democratic presidential candidates that he had nothing to do with the killing.

While the violent death of a 54-year-old woman with three children is both tragic and shocking, the attempt to turn Bhutto into a martyr for democracy is preposterous.

She was brought back to Pakistan as part of a sordid scheme hatched by the Bush administration to give the military-controlled regime headed by Musharraf a pseudo-democratic facade.

The *Washington Post* spelled out the details of this deal in a report Friday.

With mounting political unrest in Pakistan, Washington was desperate to prop up the military strongman, whom it viewed as a principal asset in the so-called war on terror.

“As President Pervez Musharraf’s political future began to unravel this year, Bhutto became the only politician who might help keep him in power,” the *Post* reported.

It quoted Bhutto’s lobbyist, Mark Siegel, as stating, “The US came to understand that Bhutto was not a threat to stability, but was instead the only possible way that we could guarantee stability and keep the presidency of Musharraf intact.”

The terms of the arrangement were that Bhutto’s Pakistan People’s Party would not oppose Musharraf’s widely unpopular bid for a third term as president last September and, in return, Musharraf would grant Bhutto immunity from criminal charges related to the rampant corruption that characterized her previous terms as prime minister.

US officials, including Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher, served as the direct brokers in 18 months of negotiations leading to the deal, flying back and forth between Islamabad and Bhutto's homes in Dubai and London.

Musharraf was reportedly opposed to any amnesty for Bhutto, not to mention her return to power. According to the *Post* report, it was Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte—a veteran of dirty deals with dictators—who finally convinced him. “He basically delivered a message to Musharraf that we would stand by him, but he needed a democratic facade on the government, and we thought Benazir was the right choice for that face,” Bruce Riedel, a former CIA officer and National Security Council staff member, told the *Post*.

In the end, it was Bush's Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice who phoned Bhutto in early October, telling her to return to Pakistan to serve essentially as an instrument of US policy and a prop for the Musharraf regime. In doing so, Rice sent Bhutto to her death.

Musharraf had no real desire to move ahead with Washington's attempt to make Bhutto the presentable “face” for his reactionary regime, which led to, at the very least, the denial of state protection to Bhutto, if not her outright assassination by elements of the state.

The political reality behind Bhutto's facade

Had the deal been consummated, it hardly would have led to a flowering of democracy in Pakistan. Rather, it would have installed a Washington-controlled prime minister as the figurehead for a military-dominated regime aligned with the Bush administration in a country where 70 percent of the population is hostile to US policy in the region.

And, while Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party has engaged in populist and even pseudo-socialist rhetoric, it has always been a representative of the Pakistan's landed aristocracy and a firm defender of its power and privileges. During her two terms in power, the Bhutto family used their control over the state apparatus to enrich themselves, with her husband, Asif Ali Zardari, earning the nickname “Mr. ten percent,” for the kickbacks he extracted for state contracts.

Her governments—like that of Musharraf—were characterized by harsh repression, disappearances and state killings, including that of her own brother, Murtaza, who had split from the PPP.

That Washington was able to broker a deal between Bhutto and Musharraf is testimony to the entirely rotten and anti-democratic character of the Pakistani bourgeoisie as a whole, a ruling elite that is separated by a vast gulf from the masses of impoverished workers and peasants and which has defended its wealth and power through savage repression, open alignment with imperialism and appeals to every form of religious obscurantism and communalist hatred.

The direct involvement of Musharraf and the Pakistani military in the Bhutto assassination will not stop the Bush administration from continuing to collaborate with him or, if necessary, another military strongman. Washington has maintained its strategic alliance with Pakistan through the continuous assassinations and military coups that have characterized the country's history.

It has acted as a direct accomplice in many of these crimes, most notoriously in the support given by President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State of State Henry Kissinger to the

bloodbath unleashed against Bengali nationalist movement in 1971, in which US-supplied arms were used to butcher hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of civilians, while millions more were turned into refugees.

The Bush administration's aim remains that of rescuing and somehow legitimizing the Musharraf regime. Bush spent a large part of Friday in a secure video conference linking his ranch in Crawford, Texas with the US National Security Council in Washington and the American ambassador in Islamabad to discuss the Pakistani crisis.

The entire country has been plunged into violence by the assassination, with banks, police stations, government offices, railroad terminals and trains burned and dozens of people killed. Pakistani security forces have been given "shoot on sight" orders against anyone seen to be engaging in "anti-state activities." Transportation services have been shut down and gas stations closed by government order, leaving huge numbers of people stranded.

Under these conditions, the White House and the State Department are publicly calling for parliamentary elections set for January 8 to be held as planned, claiming that to postpone them would dishonor Bhutto's memory. While even before the assassination, holding these elections with Musharraf still in power would have stripped them of any credibility, to stage them after the killing of the principal opposition leader would render them farcical. The White House sees such an exercise solely as a fig leaf for its imperialist policy in Pakistan, serving the same function as similar votes staged in US-occupied Iraq and Afghanistan.

The urgency attached to this exercise is bound up with Washington's plans for expanded military operations in the country. The day before Bhutto's assassination, the *Washington Post's* national security columnist William Arkin reported, "Beginning early next year, US Special Forces are expected to vastly expand their presence in Pakistan, as part of an effort to train and support indigenous counter-insurgency forces and clandestine counterterrorism units, according to defense officials involved with the planning."

Several days earlier, NBC's Pentagon correspondent Jim Miklaszewski reported that US special operation troops are already "engaged in direct attacks against Al Qaeda inside Pakistan" operating in the tribal regions in the west of the country. The report made it clear that the so-called "trainers" sent by the US are directly involved in combat alongside Pakistani forces.

The report also quoted US Defense Secretary Robert Gates as stating, "Al Qaeda right now seems to have turned its face toward Pakistan and attacks against the Pakistani government."

Meanwhile a Pentagon spokesman stressed Friday that Washington is confident that Pakistan's nuclear weapons are "under control." Nonetheless, there have also been reports that the US military is reviewing contingency plans for a military intervention in the country on the pretext of safeguarding its nuclear arsenal.

The mass popular revulsion over the Bhutto assassination has unleashed intense instability in Pakistan. A further unraveling of the political situation could well draw the US military into direct involvement in the attempt to suppress popular upheavals in a country of 165 million people.

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