

## Pakistan and Benazir : the way forward

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## **PAKISTAN AND BENAZIR: The Way Forward**

Mohamed Nawab M. Osman

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*The killing of Benazir Bhutto has once again thrown Pakistan into a state of turmoil. The landscape of Pakistani politics may be altered completely. The turbulence and instability could be overcome if the two main opposition parties come together to form a unity government.*

**MANY OBSERVERS** of Pakistani politics were taken aback by the timing of the assassination and how it was done. Yet, the assassination did not come as a major surprise. The writings were already on the wall. General Pervez Musharraf had warned Ms. Bhutto upon her return in October 18 that her life was in danger. During her homecoming parade, a suicide bombing killed 139 people. Al Qaeda No. 2 Ayman al-Zawahri decried Ms. Bhutto's return in a video message calling for attacks on all the candidates in the January 8 elections. She herself had made several statements that her life was under threat. Already fingers are pointing at Al Qaeda, the Taliban and numerous other terrorist organisations operating in Pakistan.

The extremists' hatred for Bhutto stems from several reasons. Firstly, she was a woman and in their worldview, it is inappropriate for a woman to lead a Muslim country. Secondly, she was seen to be a close ally of the Americans. This was demonstrated by Washington's attempts to force Musharraf to strike a deal with her. Thirdly, her commitment to fight for a liberal political agenda made Ms. Bhutto an important target for attack.

### **Political Uncertainty Among Opposition Parties**

If a free and fair election is held on February 18, both Ms. Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) or PML(N) of another former premier Nawaz Sharif are likely to obtain the largest portion of votes. Sharif is the most popular Pakistani leader after Benazir. Recent polls indicated that his party had the support of 25% of the people. However, Sharif is ineligible to stand for office due to criminal and corruption charges. His brother, a former chief minister of the

province of Punjab, Shabaz Sharif, has also been barred from holding public office. This can lead to complications for the PML (N) in the scenario that the party wins a majority of seats at the provincial level. The party is expected to do well in Punjab.

The PPP is widely expected to form the largest bloc of seats in the next parliament given the sympathy votes that the party will gain. The PPP's decision to appoint Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, Benazir's 19-year-old son, as her successor would strengthen the position of the party. His Bhutto surname is important in keeping the party united. However, real power rests in the hands of Asif Ali Zardari, Benazir's husband and Bilawal's father. Zardari has been hugely unpopular in the PPP. He is seen to have been a liability to the late Bhutto due to various alleged corruption scandals. Zardari himself realised this. The tactical move to appoint his son as co-chairman is meant to curb all opposition to him. It is difficult for any leader of the PPP to successfully oppose a Bhutto.

The result of the upcoming election is likely to cause more uncertainty. No single party is likely to win a majority of the seats. However, this problem could be resolved if the two main opposition parties, the PPP and PML (N) put aside their rivalry, come together and form a coalition government. This coalition government was an idea that was formulated by Bhutto before her assassination. This coalition would strengthen the democratic forces in Pakistan against the authoritarian rule of Musharraf.

### **Will Musharraf Survive?**

If the above scenario emerges, Musharraf's position could become tenuous. However, he is still left with several options to maintain power. The recent delay in the Pakistani election is an attempt by Musharraf to out-manoeuvre the two main political parties, the PPP and PML (N). He could do this by creating discord between the two parties and create fissures within the PPP. Many in the PPP are not too comfortable with the idea that Zardari has become the de-facto leader of the party. Already, there are reports that the intelligence agencies are trying to incite defections from the PPP.

Secondly, Musharraf could still utilise the umbrella organisation of Islamist parties, the Muttahida Majlisi Amal (MMA) for his political purposes as he did in the 2002 elections. These parties remain popular in many parts of the country especially in the North West Frontier Province and Balochistan. It is not likely that support for these parties would reduce markedly. The PPP has never been able to successfully galvanise votes in these two provinces. Bhutto's assassination may not cause a massive decline in support for the MMA in these provinces.

Musharraf could also use official resources in support of his party, the Pakistan Muslim League (Quaid) and employ pressure tactics to manipulate elections. His last course of action is utilising his presidential powers to curb the powers of the new prime minister should he come from the opposition parties. One could expect that Musharraf will resort to the above tactics to remain in power. This will cause further unrest in Pakistan.

### **United States, Pakistan and the War on Terror**

The current political scenario should persuade the United States and its allies to reconsider its current policy towards Pakistan. While Musharraf seems to be the only viable option, he has proven his inability to be a serious partner in the war on terror and could not even curb extremism within his own country. The rise of extremism in the tribal areas of Pakistan is reflective of this inability.

Worse still, the Musharraf regime had depended on the MMA and its extremist allies for support in the past. He will continue to rely on them given his current perilous position. This means that he will make further compromises to extremist voices in the country. The US must realise that the key aim of

an authoritarian leader like Musharraf is to remain in power at any cost. It will be to the benefit of the US that a coalition government of the two main democratic parties is formed.

Such a government could prove to be a more serious partner in the war on terror. The PPP and PML (N) constituencies are also not made up of the more extreme segments of Pakistani society. As such, it could seriously attempt to wipe out terrorist groups without fear of losing support from their constituencies. It is in the interest of the US and the international community to support the democratic voices in Pakistan rather than a former military general whose decline is imminent.

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