Special supplement

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What's next in Pakistan?

David Whitehouse examines the backdrop to the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan—and the future of the country as protests rage.

ANU MALIK—DEAN PICTURES

▲ Protesters in Islamabad following the assassination of Benazir Bhutto

CITIES AND towns across Pakistan erupted in anger over the assassination of the country's leading opposition political figure, former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, on December 27—as a major crisis, not only for Pakistan but the U.S. "war on terror" as well, continues to unfold.

Bhutto was killed as she campaigned for elections—organized under U.S. pressure—that she was expected to win. The Bush administration calculated that Bhutto would return to the prime minister's office, providing democratic credentials for the military-controlled government of its ally, President Pervez Musharraf.

In return for U.S. support, Bhutto had promised to crack down on pro-Taliban elements in Pakistan involved in the resistance in neighboring Afghanistan. Now, with a nuclear-armed Pakistan in turmoil, the U.S./NATO occupation of Afghanistan will find the going even more difficult.

"The murder of the 54-year-old former prime minister," the *Financial Times* reported, "deprives the U.S. of its best hope of providing a civilian façade to the unpopular rule" of Musharraf, who seized power in a 1999 military coup.

The Western media were virtually unanimous in blaming al-Qaeda for Bhutto's murder, but Pakistan's protesters generally blame Musharraf, with good reason.

The other theme in U.S. coverage was the depiction of Bhutto as a champion of democracy and political freedoms, cut down by the fanatical extremists she opposed. But here, too, the truth is quite different, given her history of corruption during two terms in office and her autocratic control of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP).

Days after her murder, Musharraf's hand-picked election commission decided to delay parliamentary elections six weeks to February 18. Commissioners cited the disruption caused by the strikes, demonstrations and riots that followed the assassination.

In some places, rioters destroyed the official machinery of the election, including ballots, ballot boxes and voter rolls.

In previous elections, the military kept extra ballots on hand to rig the vote count in key districts. The PPP argues that the delay in the election could give the army time to fix the result.

While Musharraf's popularity reached an all-time low in Pakistan, most U.S. politicians—including George Bush and most of the leading presidential candidates, Democrat and Republican alike—refused to call for his resignation. They apparently see Musharraf as the key to stability in Pakistan's near future, even if they would prefer to dump him later on.

Among the major presidential contenders, only Democrat Bill Richardson called for Musharraf's resignation and a cutoff of military aid to Pakistan.

The assassination has shifted the political climate in the U.S. by giving the "war on terror" renewed prominence—with the presidential contenders rushing to show how tough they are on foreign policy.

Republican Rudolph Giuliani dusted off images of himself in New York City following the September 11 attacks. Hillary Clinton and John McCain emphasized their personal acquaintances with both Bhutto and Musharraf. Barack Obama stressed his opposition to launching the invasion of Iraq, claiming that those who supported it, including Clinton, diverted resources from the "real" war on terror—in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Who killed Benazir Bhutto?

THOUGH SPECULATION in the West immediately focused on al-Qaeda, Musharraf's security forces were at the very least negligent in protecting Bhutto, who narrowly survived a suicide bomb attack on October 18 after returning from exile to campaign in the parliamentary elections.

Video and still footage of the fatal December 27 attack showed Bhutto waving to a crowd from her limousine's sunroof—and the pistol-wielding assassin getting within 10 feet of her before firing. For weeks, Bhutto had been telling reporters she had requested heavier security—including police cars to flank her vehicle, and private guards like the ones the U.S. provides for Afghan President Hamid Karzai—but Pakistani officials refused.

In addition to malign neglect at the top of Musharraf's regime, pro-Islamist elements in the security forces or army could have played a direct role in the murder plot—whether or not al-Qaeda operatives did pull the trigger and detonate the accompanying bomb.

Speculation about who really killed Bhutto is not going to lessen. Her surviving husband, Asif Ali Zardari, refused to allow an autopsy, so even the type and extent of her wounds is in doubt. The government has stuck to its initial claim that Bhutto died because the bomb blast threw her head against the handle of the sunroof, but party workers inside the car insist that she was shot—and suffered a large exit wound in her skull.

After widespread demands that an outside agency look into the murder, Musharraf announced that members of Britain's Scotland Yard would join the Pakistani team—but as subordinate members. There won't be much evidence to look at since police used firehoses to sweep debris away from the crime scene within hours of the murder.

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What's next in Pakistan?

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The possibility of direct complicity within the security establishment, something even Hillary Clinton acknowledged, highlights a basic conflict inside the military—and a contradiction in U.S. policy.

In previous decades, the U.S. was content to support pro-Islamist elements within the military and the Inter-Services Intelligence Service (ISI). In the 1980s, the U.S. collaborated with Pakistan to support mujahideen fighters against the Russian occupation of Afghanistan. In the 1990s, President Bill Clinton tolerated Pakistan's sponsorship of the Taliban in the hopes that this would stabilize Afghanistan.

In other words, for this period, the military and the ISI could be simultaneously pro-U.S. and pro-Islamist.

Following the September 11 attacks, however, the Bush administration's message was that the military and the ISI would have to take sides. Musharraf's choice to join the "war on terror" showed that the military brass and Pakistan's wider elite valued the U.S. connection—and U.S. aid—above all else.

But Musharraf's reversal could never be complete. Some Islamists in the army and ISI resigned, and others were demoted or executed, but many remained. Musharraf still leaned on Islamist cadres, inside and outside the officer corps, as a battering ram against civilian parties, including Bhutto's PPP and the Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N) of Nawaz Sharif, the prime minister ousted by Musharraf.

The persecution of opposition parties by the military and their Islamist partners led, in 2002, to unprecedented Islamist electoral victories in the provinces that border Afghanistan.

Musharraf's double game—selectively fighting Islamists on behalf of the U.S. while aggressively promoting the ascendancy of political Islam—confirms the idea that Musharraf bears responsibility for Bhutto's murder, even if he didn't order it or even personally favor it.

But if Musharraf bears at least some measure of blame for the assassination, he hasn't benefited from it.

The protests following the killing had many targets—police stations, banks, trains and buses have been torched, and looting is widespread.

While symbols of wealth and privilege were attacked in the riots, the most consistent object of the crowds' anger was Musharraf's ruling party, the Pakistan Muslim League-Q (PML-Q). Images of Musharraf, along with PML(Q) campaign posters are gone, and party offices have been ransacked and burned. Officials of the ruling party initially went underground to escape the fury of Bhutto's sympathizers.

No doubt this is the main reason why Bhutto's successors in the PPP are protesting the election delay. Sympathy for their party is at a peak, so a vote could sweep them into office and deliver a sharp blow to both the PML(Q) and its Islamist allies.

Does the U.S. care about democracy?

WESTERN EDITORIALISTS echoed George Bush's view that the assassination "was a cowardly act by murderous extremists who are trying to undermine Pakistan's democracy."

But Bhutto's presence in Pakistan was the result of a U.S. attempt, over the heads of ordinary Pakistanis, to bolster Musharraf's failing strength by putting a civilian face—Bhutto's—on the regime.

A genuine democracy movement erupted in Pakistan last summer when 80,000 lawyers mobilized to protest Musharraf's removal of the Supreme Court chief justice who ruled against him on key issues and threatened to block his reelection as president on constitutional grounds. Thousands more left-wing activists, unionists and workers in liberal non-governmental organizations joined the protests as well, eventually forcing Musharraf to back down.

But after Bhutto's return, Musharraf declared emergency rule to prevent the Supreme Court from invalidating his election. He used the opportunity to target pro-democracy activists, throwing about 10,000 people in jail and imposing strict censorship on the broadcast media.

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Bhutto then declared that the power-sharing deal was off, but never closed the door completely to reconciliation. She kept the PPP rank and file out of the pro-democracy movement as the U.S. tried to broker the deal between her and Musharraf. If the PPP won a majority in parliament with her as candidate for prime minister, Bhutto probably would have needed to rule in coalition with the PML(Q).

In order to begin a third term as prime minister, Bhutto would have needed to amend the constitution, which requires a two-thirds majority. And before that, she needed—and received—an amnesty from Musharraf for corruption charges of stealing billions during her first two terms. Her husband Asif Zardari was known as "Mister 10 Percent" because of his demands for kickbacks on government contracts while Bhutto was prime minister.

Following her murder, Bhutto "willed" the chairmanship to Zardari as if the party was her property—like her massive landholdings and multiple houses. Zardari promptly declared their 19-year-old son Bilawal as co-chair, and inserted "Bhutto" as his middle name in order to maintain the family cachet.

"The Pakistan People's Party is being treated as a family heirloom, a property to be disposed of at the will of its leader," wrote Tariq Ali, the Pakistani-British author and activist.

Zardari, known as an affable but untrustworthy playboy, is mistrusted by much of the PPP, so he nominated longtime PPP official Makhdoom Amin Fahim to run for prime minister, rather than be a candidate himself. Fahim, like most major politicians in Pakistan, comes from a landholding family of feudal origin. His politics are so reliably pro-elite that Musharraf asked him in 2003 to serve as his prime minister.

In fact, if the PPP does sweep the election, Fahim could still serve with Musharraf or some other president acceptable to the military, thus fulfilling the power-sharing scheme that the U.S. favored—minus Bhutto.

The reason is that real democracy was not the policy goal before Bhutto's assassination—and it isn't now. The real concern of Pakistani and U.S. elites alike has been the stability of the state itself—including its central institution, the army.

With the army split between pro-U.S. and pro-Islamist forces, the Pakistani landholder-bourgeoisie ha favored the U.S. connection. A disorderly rejection of Musharraf would threaten the pro-U.S. forces in the military. For this reason, Pakistanis can expect a continued heavy presence of the military in day-to-day governance, even if there is a civilian prime minister, and even if Musharraf is replaced.

This authoritarian presence, backed by the U.S., will not be dislodged until a political force is organized to do it. The demonstrations going on now—like those earlier in the year for freedom of the press and independence of the judiciary—are encouraging signs, but they are not strong or independent enough to drive through an alternative.

In the short run, the more likely scenario is that Pakistanis' hopes for democracy will be channeled into the election of the PPP—which will immediately call, as Bhutto often did, for "potentially disruptive" demonstrations to end.

For this reason, the PPP may become the consensus choice of Pakistan's ruling class, since the party is its best hope of demobilizing the forces that have been protested against Musharraf. But Bhutto's party does not represent a genuine hope for democracy and freedom in Pakistan.

What else to read

The ***International Socialist Review*** (www.isreview.org) has had continuing coverage of the crisis in Pakistan, including a review essay by Snehal Shingavi in the current issue, now on sale. David Whitehouse's *ISR* article **"Turning Point in Pakistan"** (www.isreview.org/issues/56/feat-pakistan.shtml) contains substantial background on the military and the war with the Islamists.

Several Pakistani newspapers published in English are worth reading for daily updates on the current situation. See *The Nation* (www.nation.com.pk) and *Dawn* (www.dawn.com).