

Pakistan's (Still, and More) Frightening Crystal Ball, Part II

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Bhutto's widower conducting a massive rally

My last piece was written a little more than a week before the sad yet predictable assassination of Benazir Bhutto two days after Christmas. Nationwide elections that were supposed to be the start of a more “democratic” government in Pakistan, then scheduled for January 8th, were (wisely) postponed by Musharraf after the massive protests, rioting, violence and chaos that followed and are now scheduled for February 18th. In my last piece, I stated that Musharraf was truly in a no-win situation; this is even more so today, as he is (unfairly) blamed for Bhutto’s assassination, is even outright accused of it, and faces all of the same problems as before but at a more intense level, with even less support at home and abroad than ever before. And recent developments in Afghanistan, India, and the United States all seem to be trending towards not really helping to bring stability to Afghanistan, and, in turn, Pakistan is in a position to cause serious headaches for all of these countries, if not migraines.

To start with, Peter Bergen, famous as the first Westerner to interview Osama bin Laden in 1997 and since recognized as an expert on terrorist movements and security issues, made a great comparison on CNN: he said that many Pakistanis will look at the assassination of Benazir Bhutto the same way many Americans look at the assassination of JFK, (Obama is not the only one drawing comparisons to JFK these days, then) meaning, they will believe what they want to believe.

There is no evidence that elements of the Pakistani government or Musharraf himself were behind, involved, or even passively complicit in Bhutto’s assassination. I have seen the video of the assassination several times, and it seems fairly clear that Pakistani officials were trying to protect her, but that in such an open, mobbed, chaotic outdoor atmosphere, it was too easy to take her out for anyone that wanted to do so. Musharraf said as much in an interview on “60 Minutes” a little over a week after her assassination, though somewhat tactlessly. He seemed to characterize her decision to stand up on her

vehicle just before her assassination as careless, especially in the context of the bombing of her homecoming parade just after her return from exile. He said she was given more security than any other individual, but since many people in Pakistan hate Musharraf, nothing he can say will change the idea they have in their heads that he and his “minions” killed her, just as many Americans, despite all the evidence to the contrary, believe the CIA, Castro, the “Mafia” & Co. took out President Kennedy. In fact, in an e-mail sent (secretly) to Wolf Blitzer of CNN in late October, Bhutto herself, while saying she did not believe Musharraf himself would want her dead, took care to say his “minions” did and blamed him for poor security arrangements, and that if anything should happen to her, Musharraf should still be held responsible. The people have certainly gone along with her recommendation *post-mortem*.

Yet the e-mail should not be taken at face value; Bhutto had made Musharraf her number one target, and it seems that she was blatantly trying to use anti-Musharraf feeling in Pakistan to her own political advantage. In fact, [several experts have argued that part of her strategy seemed to have been to further destabilize Pakistan in order to topple Musharraf in the hopes of occupying the inevitable subsequent power vacuum](#). So even her own words, then, in addition to the vehement conviction of many Pakistanis that Musharraf killed Bhutto, must be taken with a grain of salt. As far as her not having proper security arrangements, Christopher Hitchens notes in a [piece for Slate](#), “right to the end, she carried on without the fetish of “security” and with lofty disregard for her own safety.” He points out that, call it what you will, bravery/foolish disregard for her own safety were characteristic of her entire career.

To further detract from the conspiracy theorists’ claims, specialists from Scotland Yard and other British Government experts, requested by Musharraf himself to come and weigh in on the issue, recently confirmed the Pakistani Government’s conclusion about the cause of her death being head trauma, resulting from a collision caused by the blast of the bomb in front of her vehicle. In addition, the CIA recently came out in support of Musharraf’s claim that Islamic militants were responsible for Bhutto’s murder, identifying Taliban warlord, al-Qaeda supporter, and Waziristan tribal leader [Baitullah Mehsud](#) as the man responsible for organizing the assassination. He is also the Pakistani Government’s prime suspect. The CIA stated that several of the assassins had links to al-Qaeda, while Pakistan’s government says it intercepted messages from Mehsud praising his militants for a job well-done concerning the assassination.

Mehsud has denied responsibility, blaming Musharraf. Of course, his prime goal right now is to destabilize Pakistan and that accusation furthers that aim by undermining Musharraf, while on the other side of that coin, with stability as their primary goal it is hard to believe that Musharraf and his people were behind the assassination. Still, while Musharraf or his “minions” being behind the assassination is not a wholly improbable scenario, a far better and more likely case can be made that it is al-Qaeda/Taliban elements that carried it out, based on the CIA’s conclusion and that over the past month and then some, political rallies, leaders and parties have been the target of increasingly violent attacks, whether in Pakistan’s major cities or in the heart of the lawless tribal north, the base of the Islamists, where just yesterday a suicide bomber attacked a packed

indoor political rally of a secular party killing twenty-seven and wounding fifty. Coupled with attacks against the military and government and battles against militants, hundreds of Pakistanis have been killed in this type of violence in a spate of incidents, ranging from hostage situations to military confrontations and suicide bombers on motorbikes, since the time Bhutto has been assassinated (Ironically, [Bhutto was responsible for much of the empowerment of these same groups when she was Prime Minister](#)).

In fact, though Bhutto's death received a far larger share of media coverage, in some ways the attacks(s) on her convoy(s) can simply be seen as part of the Islamists' methodical campaign of attacking any comparatively moderate secular voice or political party as it simultaneously conducts its insurgency against the government of Pakistan itself. Again, their goal is to destabilize Pakistan and bring down the Pakistani Government in an effort to Talibanize all of Pakistan while eliminating any potential rivals (e.g., Bhutto, secular parties) for power. This has been the case for years, and again, while it is not wholly improbable that elements of the Pakistani Government are behind some of these groups and parties assaulting it politically, the idea that the government could be orchestrating violent attacks against these groups while it confronts a full blown rebellion and insurgency of the Islamists is hard to believe. Musharraf himself has only narrowly escaped assassination multiple times. The government is forced to humiliatingly negotiate with these extremists that are blatantly attacking its forces, ([including a supposed cease-fire with Mehsud](#)) so it appears increasingly weak and hardly capable of attacking these domestic peaceful political groups while it battles the insurgency. Furthermore, such attacks risk further instability, which is clearly what the current Pakistani Government desires to avoid above all else. America's Secretary of Defense Robert Gates underscored the seriousness of the threat posed by these Taliban and al-Qaeda elements, based in the inhospitable mountainous border regions with Afghanistan, when he said just today that they are not merely a "nuisance" to Pakistan, but "[are] potentially a threat to [Pakistan's] government." The government appears increasingly hapless as the insurgents grow bolder and increase the frequency, scope, and range of their attacks.

Such is the trend of developments in Afghanistan as the Taliban and al-Qaeda increase their presence, boldness, and attacks there as well. And they are taking some ideas from the playbook of the insurgents and terrorists in Iraq fighting Americans there, introducing roadside bombs, so lethal to Americans in Iraq, to the NATO troops operating in Afghanistan. The resurgence of the Taliban and al-Qaeda (of particular strength in the southern border regions with Pakistan) is specifically tied to the drug trade in Afghanistan; the success of the drug trade funds these groups, and the success of these groups make it easier for the now-record drug trade to flourish. This comes at a time [when friction among NATO allies, including America, threatens to erase some of the recent gains in Afghanistan for lack of "political will";](#) agreement on the need for more troops does not mean agreement on who should provide those troops and how they should operate.

At the same meeting in which Secretary Gates talked of the threat posed by these extremists to the Pakistani Government, he also cautioned Europe that failing to deal with

them in Afghanistan risks bringing more of these extremists to the very heart of Europe. [I say “more” because it is astonishing how many Pakistanis or people who have trained in camps in Pakistan’s lawless northern border-region have been arrested in connection with potential or impending plots and also participated in actual attacks.](#) In such a way, Pakistan’s *jihadist* specter has loomed over the July 2005 bombings in the London Underground, a plot to hit areas of London with fertilizer bombs, the plot thwarted in August 2006 the aim of which was to hijack airplanes traveling from the UK to the US, (that whole reason travelers can’t bring liquids on board flights now) the September 2007 plot to attack an American airbase in Germany and the Frankfurt Airport, and a recent case of just last month where fourteen (mostly Pakistani) people were arrested last month in Spain in a plot said to involve attacks in Spain, Germany, France, Portugal, and the UK, with other suspects still at large throughout Europe. That last plot appears to be directed by, of all people, Baitullah Mehsud, and marks a departure from previously home-grown cells in Europe because it seems that these *jihadists* were sent specifically *from Pakistan to Europe* to carry out these attacks. All of a sudden, Pakistan’s problems really are the West’s.

While Pakistani politics made a brief appearance in the American presidential primary dialogue, with the departure of the likes of Sen. Joseph Biden from the campaign and a looming (potential?) recession, foreign policy, for now, has receded as an issue of prime importance as the primary fields thin and American voters turn inward. With even American commitment in Iraq being battered around as a political football, it is impossible right now to tell what, if any, new approach would be taken regarding Pakistan by a new American administration. And this football plays second fiddle right now to the personalities of the candidates in media-coverage that seems less and less issue driven every day these campaigns continue.

Mr. Bush, on his way out, seems something more a spectator to world events these days, rather than a mover and a shaker; as far as his relationship with Mr. Musharraf, he seems reluctant to abandon him while at the same time he is distancing himself from him. But even as the American people seem content to ignore Pakistan, the instability in that country, its nuclear arsenal, its new export of *jihadists*, and the issues of political capital and credibility expended by American support for Musharraf, are all not going away. Neither is the fact that Pakistan’s fate is tied to that of Afghanistan and American’s grand experiment in democracy and nation-building there.

If the history of Pakistan’s neighbor to the south is any indicator, they, too, are intertwined. In yet another negative development in India, a late December election in the Gujarat state in India saw the re-election of Narendra Modi to the head post of that region in an unexpected landslide victory for his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and an unexpected and major blow to the Congress Party which currently head’s India’s national government. This major Indian state is in many ways the heart and soul of India’s industry and is a major part of India’s recent rise to economic superpower. Unfortunately, the BJP is a party with a Hindu nationalist agenda and Mr. Modi has been keen to exploit anti-Muslim feelings among Hindus in his rise to power. He appears to have tacitly approved or at least idly stood by in 2002 when a pogrom was launched by

BJP-type Hindu radicals against Muslims in response to the deaths of fifty-nine Hindus in a fire on a train. Over 1,000 Muslims were killed and many neighborhoods destroyed in this program. The success of Mr. Modi's party at the expense of the ruling Congress Party has already led some to conclude that the Congress Party's days of being in power are numbered. The continuing rise of Modi's BJP and his leading of this major Indian state—right on Pakistan's border—does not bode well for relations between India and Pakistan and for allaying the justified concerns of an increasingly repressed Muslim minority in India. One can already see religious and nationalist extremists on both-sides of the Pakistani-Indian border salivating at the opportunities that present themselves here.

And what about the election in Pakistan, scheduled for February 18th? It is impossible to tell if real events or the insecurity of Musharraf's regime will even allow this election to go ahead as planned, and then there are the questions of legitimacy and fairness and will disaffected groups be satisfied even if the elections are fair. None of the likely answers to these questions can provide any real comfort. A Gallup poll taken in January showed 68% of respondents in Pakistan wanted Musharraf to resign vs. stay. Meanwhile, Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) has a new man at the helm: her controversial widow, Asif Ali Zardari. He has been surrounded by scandals for years, mostly concerning corruption; his nickname was "Mr. 10%," as in a 10% bribe as price an action by him. Along with Bhutto's nineteen-year-old son by him, Zardari is co-chair of the PPP. About 100,000 people thronged a PPP rally Saturday where Zardari condemned Musharraf and his government in incendiary language and blamed Musharraf and his people for the murder of his wife. Of course, that went over well with the crowd. He said Musharraf's government was threatened by the change his wife wanted to bring about for Pakistan. "That is why they were against us," Zardari said. "If they try to stop me, I will destroy them and I hope you people will support me." He also asked, "How many Bhuttos will you kill? However many, from every house, a Bhutto will come." Not on the ballot for this upcoming election, he is said to be contemplating a future run to become Prime Minister, to follow in his wife's footsteps. Despite his past, most PPP supporters seem to be willing to overlook his faults in honor of Benazir Bhutto.

Before her assassination the PPP was polling a strong first place with Nawaz Sharif's more conservative party coming in second. Post-assassination, the PPP is only expected to have more support, and Sharif, the former Prime Minister ousted by Musharraf's coup nearly a decade ago, now seems more conciliatory towards the PPP where before he seemed to be more at odds over competition with his old rival, Bhutto. In a rally a few weeks ago, Sharif exclaimed "Musharraf has destroyed Pakistan. He is blindly following America's orders." Playing the anti-American card in a way Zardari is not, he says he is actually not willing to work at all with Musharraf, while, Zardari implies he is. Just like his dead wife, he is playing the game of exploiting Musharraf's unpopularity while leaving his own options open if it means he can advance his own career with Musharraf's help, should he still be standing when the dust settles.

Politics in general has been cowed, though, as the increasing attacks, most likely by Muslim extremists, have made holding rallies difficult and have all but made public campaigning rare and not the norm. Moderates and secularists are being killed and

intimidated to shuffle to the sidelines. As for honest discussions of the issues, Musharraf has clamped down against independent media in an effort to silence some of the loudest critics of his regime, so good information is hard to come by. Politics these days are more and more being conducted inside buildings, supposedly safer than the outdoors, but only slightly so, as yesterday's already-mentioned bombing shows. Between state crack-downs and Islamist-directed violence, it is hard to get your message out if you are a candidate in Pakistan these days.

As for Musharraf himself, it remains unclear what he will do, but he is already being accused of rigging the upcoming elections. Many world leaders who have supported him in the past have now distanced themselves, a panel of retired Pakistani generals has called for him to step down, and even members of his own party are deserting him and joining the PPP. His government has even made arrests in the investigation into Bhutto's demise, but most Pakistani blindly blame him. In press conferences he seems testier and more stressed than he has been in the past, but that should be of no surprise. Many of the same problems for him exist as they did when I wrote my last piece, only they are worse: the lawyers are still clamoring for reinstatement of the Supreme Court Justices that seemed ready to or already were challenging Musharraf, only now the lawyers are threatening a nationwide strike; in the wake of Bhutto's assassination, the opposition is more powerful than ever before; Islamists like al-Qaeda and the Taliban and fiercely independent tribes are more powerful and aggressive than even just a few months ago; the West's campaign against the same Taliban and al-Qaeda groups on the Afghan side of the border may falter; and he has fewer friends than ever before. Of the three remaining heavyweights in the American Presidential race, only John McCain speaks favorably of him and George Bush has little ability to help him as anything he does to support him would play right into Musharraf's critics' hands. Looking at the prospect of democratic elections that could rip his country apart and spread Talibanization throughout Pakistan, perhaps the *Economist* put it best, as it is apt to do: ["If he rigs, he may have to rig big."](#)