

Bomb blasts hit Bhutto's return to Pakistan

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Two bomb blasts last night ripped through huge crowds in the Pakistani city of Karachi gathered to welcome former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, who had just returned after eight years in exile.

Up to 125 people are reported dead and 100 injured, but the toll could rise as police and rescue workers assess the scene. Bhutto, who was travelling on top of a specially prepared truck, escaped unharmed and was immediately taken to her official residence. Among the dead were supporters of Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) as well as police and journalists.

Bhutto landed in Karachi at around 2 p.m. local time from Dubai and was making her way at snail's pace toward the shrine of Pakistan's founder Mohammed Ali Jinnah, where she was due to give a speech. Some 20,000 police and paramilitary troops, including snipers and bomb disposal units, had been mobilised to provide security. An estimated 150,000 to 300,000 people lined the route. The two bombs detonated shortly after midnight, creating scenes of panic and chaos.

At this stage, no organisation has claimed responsibility. At least three groups linked to Al Qaeda and the Taliban were reportedly threatening to kill Bhutto for supporting for the US "war on terrorism" and its occupation of Afghanistan. Haji Omar, a Taliban commander in Waziristan, told Reuters: "She has an agreement with America. We will carry out attacks on Benazir Bhutto as we did on General Pervez Musharraf."

Pakistani President Musharraf and the US were both quick to condemn the bombings. For months, the Bush administration has been pressing the beleaguered military strongman to reach a power-sharing deal with Bhutto in order to intensify a security crackdown on Islamist organisations, particularly in the Pashtun tribal areas, such as Waziristan, on the Afghan-Pakistani border. Hundreds of people, including civilians, have died in fierce clashes between the military and Islamist

militants in the border region.

While a formal agreement between Musharraf and Bhutto has not been announced, there is every sign that a political understanding brokered by Washington has been reached between the two leaders. Musharraf promulgated a National Reconciliation Ordinance on October 5 that gave Bhutto immunity from corruption charges brought against her after she lost power in 1996. In return, her PPP did not join other opposition parties in opposing Musharraf's sham reelection as president on October 6.

Bhutto has returned to lead her party in national elections due to be held in January and become the new prime minister. But the arrangement with Musharraf is fraught with political and legal difficulties. Musharraf's own reelection is under challenge, as the country's constitution bars the president from also holding the post of army commander. If the Supreme Court overturns the election and blocks his installation for a second term on November 15, Musharraf may impose martial law.

Musharraf, who seized power in a coup in 1999, has been reluctant to give up control of the army, which is his only real source of power. He finally agreed to Bhutto's demand that he relinquish command of the military, but only after he is successfully installed for a second five-year term as president. Musharraf is unlikely to accept a purely ceremonial role and is reportedly seeking control over foreign affairs, defence and internal security in any arrangement with Bhutto.

For her part, Bhutto faces a series of obstacles to becoming prime minister for a third term. Not only is the Supreme Court considering challenges to the National Reconciliation Ordinance and thus her amnesty, but she must find a way around the constitution's ban on anyone serving more than two terms as prime minister. Bhutto also faces concerted opposition from within the military and the ruling

military-sponsored party, the PML (Q), which will inevitably lose power and privileges in any power-sharing deal.

It cannot be ruled out that embittered elements of the army and/or PML (Q) were responsible for last night's bombings. The Pakistani police has been quick to blame "terrorists" for the attack and allege that suicide bombers were responsible, but details of the two blasts are yet to be determined. Significantly Bhutto's husband Asif Ali Zardari, speaking from Dubai, told ARYONE World Television: "I blame the government for these blasts. It is the work of the intelligence agencies."

Bhutto's mooted deal with the dictator Musharraf has undermined her own credibility as a champion of democracy, cut into her popular standing and generated political ructions inside the PPP. According to recent polling by the US-based International Republican Institute, only 28 percent of Pakistanis regard Bhutto as the best leader for the country—a fall of 4 percent from the last poll. By contrast, support for Nawaz Sharif, who was ousted as prime minister by Musharraf in 1999, has jumped by 15 points to 36 percent. Unlike Bhutto, he has opposed any deal with Musharraf.

The official response to Sharif, who attempted to return last month from exile in Saudi Arabia, and Bhutto could not have been more different. In the days before Sharif's arrival in Islamabad, Pakistani security forces rounded up thousands of activists belonging to his Pakistan Muslim League (Sharif), including members of parliament, and surrounded the airport with a heavy cordon of police and soldiers. In breach of a Supreme Court ruling affirming Sharif's right to return to Pakistan, he was bundled onto a plane and sent back to Saudi Arabia.

Bhutto's own attempt at a triumphal return to Pakistan was an effort to claw back lost political ground. Not only did she have to counter Sharif, but Bhutto had to deal with memories of her return from exile in 1986 when 750,000 people turned out in Lahore to welcome her. Then she had returned to challenge the military dictator, General Zia ul-Haq, who had executed her father, the populist Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, in 1979. Now, Bhutto has returned to closely work with another dictator, Musharraf.

According to the British-based *Economist*, much of

the fanfare surrounding Bhutto's arrival yesterday was carefully orchestrated and paid for. "If there is no such thing as a free crowd in Pakistani politics, the one in Karachi was unusually pricey," the magazine wrote. "For over a week thousands of billboards along the 16 kilometre route that Miss Bhutto's 'caravan of democracy' was to take had been rented by PPP supporters to advertise the event. 'Welcome homeland Benazir!' was a poem emblazoned on one of them.

"To import the requisite flag-wavers from the party's strongholds in rural Sindh and southern Punjab, thousands of buses were hired. The driver of one parked outside Karachi airport, Sajjad Hussain, said he had come from Punjab province in a convoy of 100 buses. A local doctor, who is seeking a PPP ticket in the election, hired his bus for 75,000 rupees (\$1,250). Over 500 buses were reported to have come laden with Miss Bhutto's hometown of Larkana, in northern Sindh. Asked who was footing the bill, the PPP's leader in Sindh, Nisar Ahmed Khuhro, grimaced: 'We are, I am, tax-paid—we love it!'"

This charade underscores just how fragile Pakistani politics has become. Neither Bhutto, Musharraf nor Sharif has any significant base of solid political support. Each has presided over growing social inequality and resorted to anti-democratic methods to retain power. In one way or another, all have supported the Bush administration's bogus "war on terrorism" and the US occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, which are deeply unpopular in Pakistan. Right-wing Islamic fundamentalist parties and organisations have made some gains, but the far broader wellsprings of popular anger and hostility find no expression in Pakistan's political establishment.

The bomb blasts in Karachi are a reminder that Bhutto's return, far from bringing peace and democracy, is likely to open up a new chapter of political crisis and instability.



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