

In wake of assassination of Benazir Bhutto, Bush administration rushes to defense of Musharraf

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Pakistan People's Party "life chairperson" and prime ministerial candidate Benazir Bhutto was assassinated early Thursday evening, Pakistani time, while campaigning for national and provincial assembly elections scheduled for January 8.

The assassination was carried out in Rawalpindi, headquarters of the Pakistani military and ostensibly one of the country's most secure cities.

There are conflicting accounts of how the assassination occurred. Many news reports are citing witnesses as saying that Bhutto was shot in the neck and torso before her assassin blew himself up. The explosion killed at least 20 other people. However, the *New York Times* has reported senior Pakistan People's Party (PPP) officials as saying Bhutto was hit by a rooftop sniper before a second assailant carried out the suicide bombing.

A rally organized by the other major opposition party, which was to have been addressed by deposed prime minister Nawaz Sharif, also came under attack Thursday. Snipers reportedly killed four supporters of the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) and injured five more.

Before any evidence had been collected, let alone examined, and with key facts about the assassination still in dispute, the US political establishment effectively declared the investigation over, categorically attributing Bhutto's murder to Al Qaeda or a like-minded Islamicist group.

In a perfunctory statement wildly at odds with political reality in Pakistan, President George W. Bush declared Thursday morning, US time, that Bhutto's assassination was a "cowardly act by murderous extremists who are trying to undermine Pakistan's democracy." He urged Pakistanis "to honor Benazir Bhutto's memory by continuing with the democratic process for which she so bravely gave her life."

Later, White House spokesman Scott M. Stanzel said Bush planned to speak with Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf in the coming hours, but would not tell him whether to proceed with the January 8 elections. "That is up to the Pakistanis," said Stanzel.

Democratic Party presidential candidate Barack Obama spoke along the same lines as Bush, and the US media quickly took up the refrain: Bhutto was a martyr to the war on terror and the Pakistani people should rally round Musharraf and the military's stage-managed elections.

There was hardly a voice in the US media that even hinted at the possibility that elements in and around the Musharraf regime could have had a hand in Bhutto's murder. No matter that the Musharraf regime has an eight-year record of gross human rights abuses, including orchestrating lethal attacks on political opponents, and the Pakistani military-intelligence apparatus has for decades patronized armed Islamicist groups and used them as tools of its geo-political and political machinations.

Can there be any doubt that the assassination of the leading oppositional figure in a country whose military strongman was out of favor with the US would have evoked a very different response from Washington? Then the

entire American political and media establishment would have pointed the finger of guilt at the regime.

Even if the Musharraf government was not directly involved in the murder of Bhutto, a very strong case is already emerging that its calculated negligence produced an outcome it privately welcomed. Bhutto herself publicly accused elements in the government and Pakistan's military-intelligence establishment of having staged the October 18 attempt on her life in Karachi—a multiple bomb attack that killed 140 people.

Prior to her mid-October return to Pakistan, Bhutto wrote a letter to the government naming three individuals whom she said were intent on destroying her. While Bhutto never made the names public, they are reputed to have included Ijaz Shah, the director general of the Intelligence Bureau.

In recent weeks, Bhutto repeatedly complained that the government had failed to provide for her most basic security needs, including supplying her with an armored car with tinted glass windows and the requisite equipment to jam electronic bomb detonations.

One of her US spokesmen said the slain PPP leader had told him that were she killed, the Pakistani government and military should be held responsible.

US Senator Joseph Biden, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and a candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination, has stated that he personally appealed to the Musharraf regime to provide greater security for Bhutto, but his appeals were ignored.

It appears that Bhutto herself, though aware of the immense danger to which she was exposed, counted on her close relations with the US to provide her with protection. In this she gravely miscalculated.

The fraud of Pakistani "democracy"

Bhutto's assassination throws into question whether the military government headed by Musharraf will proceed with the long-promised elections. At the very least, the government can be expected to use Thursday's assassination and bombing atrocity as the pretext to ban virtually all election campaign events.

Musharraf made a brief television appearance in which he announced three days of national mourning and blamed the killing on Islamicist terrorists.

Nawaz Sharif, whom the regime has prevented even standing as an election candidate, responded to Bhutto's assassination by announcing that his party will boycott the elections if the government holds them on

January 8.

The assassination of Bhutto, Pakistan's best known opposition leader and a two-time prime minister, only underscores the utterly bogus character of the elections, which have been touted by the Bush administration and the US media as marking a climactic step in Pakistan's "democratic transformation."

On December 15, Musharraf, who seized power in a 1999 military coup, lifted the state of emergency he had imposed six weeks earlier. He had declared emergency rule so as to abolish, by dictatorial fiat, all legal-constitutional impediments to his reelection as president. The state of emergency continues, however, in all but name.

The media remains subject to draconian censorship provisions. Government opponents can be tried by military courts. Election processions and all anti-government protests are banned. And the country's Supreme and High courts, which have ultimate legal authority over the elections, have been purged of judges deemed insufficiently loyal to Musharraf.

As is generally true of such criminal conspiracies, it cannot be said with certainty who was the author of Bhutto's assassination. But much, if not most, of the Pakistani public holds the Musharraf regime and its military sponsors responsible. Distraught PPP members who had gathered at the hospital to which the fatally wounded Bhutto was taken, chanted "Dog, Musharraf, dog."

Leaders of Al Qaeda and various other Islamic militias did vow to eliminate Bhutto, after the Bush administration made clear earlier this year that it favored a power-sharing deal between her and Musharraf, in hopes of providing the dictatorship with greater popular legitimacy. But this does not mean that Islamacists carried out the killing or, even if they did, that it was not instigated or facilitated by elements from within the military-security apparatus and the government.

Many within the Pakistani military and bourgeois elite have never forgiven the PPP for having made demagogic appeals to mass discontent over poverty and inequality during its rise to power in the dying days of the Ayub Khan and Yahya Khan dictatorships. Bhutto's father, PPP founder and former Pakistani prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was hanged by the military regime of Zia-ul Haq in 1979 to a chorus of applause from Pakistan's business and landlord elite.

The Bush administration expended considerable energy in the summer and fall trying to engineer a power-sharing deal between Bhutto and Musharraf and apparently still held out hope that a deal could be fashioned between them following the sham elections. But through the support it lent Musharraf during the recent "emergency," the Bush administration made abundantly clear that it views Musharraf and the military as its best allies.

The US's steadfast support for the government and its preposterous claim to be guiding Pakistan toward democracy could have only encouraged the most ruthless and reckless elements in the military and among Musharraf's political cronies in the Pakistan Muslim League (Q), if not the president himself, to contemplate getting rid of Bhutto once and for all.

Bhutto's assassination constitutes a political decapitation of the PPP, which opinion polls had indicated was likely to emerge as the largest single party in Pakistan's national parliament. A dynastic party, the PPP has but all exclusively focused its political appeal on Benazir Bhutto and her executed father.

The assassination of the PPP's "life chairperson" manifestly benefits Musharraf and the regime by eliminating a potential rival for power and for Washington's favor. There are, however, concerns in the US political establishment, as voiced in a Council on Foreign Relations conference call with the press Thursday afternoon, that the assassination could strip the regime of any remaining credibility it enjoys and spark social unrest.

Rioting broke out in Karachi, in other cities in Bhutto's native Sindh

province and elsewhere in Pakistan. According to the BBC, at least eleven people were killed as security forces moved to quell the protests.

The role of US imperialism

It is imperialism, above all US imperialism, which ultimately bears responsibility for the political and socio-economic malignancy that is contemporary Pakistan—a country where the officer corps dominates the government and shares with a tiny stratum of capitalists and landlords the fortunes amassed from the brutal exploitation of the working class and impoverished rural toilers.

While the US media prattles on about Pakistani democracy, the reality is that Pakistani capitalism has failed to address the most elementary problems of the toiling masses—from guaranteeing basic civil liberties and the equality of women, to providing education and sanitation, to eliminating child- and bonded-labor.

In pursuit of the US elite's predatory economic and geo-political interests, Democratic and Republican administrations alike have supported a succession of brutal military dictatorships.

Two interconnected processes lie at the crux of Pakistan's still-born democracy and economic underdevelopment: the imperialist-imposed communal partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 and the refashioning of Pakistan under General Muhammad Zia ul-Haq. In close alliance with Washington, Zia "Islamicized" the Pakistani military and Pakistani politics, while making the country the pivot of the US campaign to undermine the Soviet Union by fomenting and arming Islamic fundamentalist militias in Afghanistan.

Pakistan is an artificial state, whose creation defied economic and geographic logic, to say nothing of the historical and cultural traditions of South Asia, and served to perpetuate two key elements in the British system of imperial control: the state-sponsored definition of Muslims as a separate political group and the Punjabi-dominated British Indian Army.

To say this is not to absolve the bourgeois Indian National Congress (INC) of responsibility for partition, nor to suggest that the independent bourgeois state created in India, on the foundations of the British Raj, has any greater historical legitimacy.

The INC connived with the Hindu communalist Hindu Mahasabha and RSS and was unwilling and organically incapable of defeating the machinations of British imperialism by uniting the subcontinent from below through the revolutionary mobilization of the working class and oppressed peasantry against landlordism and capitalism.

Partition was only the most graphic and bloody expression of the suppression, at the hands of imperialism and the aspirant national bourgeoisies of India and Pakistan, of the anti-imperialist movement that had convulsed the subcontinent in the first half of the twentieth century.

It has thwarted rational economic development, enshrined the communal divide in a state rivalry that has embroiled the peoples of South Asia in three declared wars, served as a means for the respective bourgeoisies to deflect social discontent into chauvinism, and, last but not least, facilitated imperialist domination of South Asia.

Continuing the role charted by the Muslim League prior to independence, the Pakistani bourgeoisie only more abjectly and openly aligned itself with imperialism than did its Indian rival during the Cold War. By the middle 1950s, Pakistan was one of Washington's "frontline" states in confrontation with the USSR, and the Pakistani military was well on the way to becoming a linchpin of US geo-political strategy. When Commander in Chief Ayub Khan seized power in 1958, he received Washington's enthusiastic support, as exemplified by the quip, "Ike [Eisenhower] likes Ayub."

After the Ayub Khan regime collapsed in 1968-69 in the face of mass student-worker protests and opposition from East Pakistan to its subordinate position within the Pakistani federation, Nixon and Kissinger encouraged a new military strongman, Yahya Khan, in a genocidal campaign to prevent Bangladesh's secession.

Pakistan's ignominious defeat in the Third Indo-Pakistani War caused the Pakistani elite and Washington to turn to Bhutto, the scion of a landlord family and former protégé of Ayub Khan. Bhutto used anti-Indian chauvinism and pseudo-socialist phrases to politically emasculate the mass opposition to the military and Pakistan's grossly unequal social order.

During his six years in power, he sought to balance precariously between conflicting social forces. He rehabilitated the military, using it to crush a nationalist insurgency in Baluchistan, proclaimed Pakistan an Islamic republic, and maintained the US-Pakistani alliance. He also carried out limited social reforms, while violently suppressing any independent actions of the working class. Ultimately, as politics internationally shifted to the right in the late 1970s, the military, under General Zia and with Washington's encouragement, seized power.

The Zia regime would have horrific consequences for the subsequent development of Pakistan. For some eleven years, beginning in 1978-79, Washington utilized Islamabad as the nexus for the US intervention in the Afghan civil war, fomenting and organizing the anti-Soviet Islamicist forces and acting as the conduit of US and Saudi arms and money to the Afghan mujahadeen. This complemented Zia's own efforts domestically to build up the Islamic right as a bulwark against the working class and the left, and to promote Islamic fundamentalism as the state ideology.

As the state withdrew from providing education and other basic public services, in keeping with the Zia regime's right-wing economic policies, Islamic religious institutions were encouraged to fill the gaping holes.

The end result was the promotion of religious obscurantism, mounting sectarian strife, increased oppression of minorities, and the development of a nexus between the military and armed Islamicist groups, which all sections of the Pakistani elite sought to make use of in Pakistan's geo-political conflict with India.

During the Cold War, Washington egged on the Pakistan elite in its ruinous rivalry with India, providing and selling Pakistan all manners of arms and weapon systems. But following the collapse of the USSR and the Indian bourgeoisie's repudiation of its national economic policy, the US, under the Clinton administration, moved to fashion a new strategic partnership with India.

Though Pakistan was now less central to US geo-political strategy, the Pentagon-Pakistani military partnership endured, with Washington continuing to view the Pakistani military as a prized asset and the bulwark of the Pakistani state.

When the Bush administration seized on the events of September 11, 2001 to shift to a more aggressive foreign policy aimed at securing US control over the oil resources of Central Asia and the Middle East, the Pentagon-Pakistani military relationship was injected with new vigor, and Musharraf quickly emerged as one of the US's most important allies.

Washington admits to having provided \$10 billion to Pakistan since September 2001, the vast bulk of it in the form of military aid and payments to the military for support in the "war on terror." In return, the Musharraf regime has provided pivotal logistical support for the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, allowed US security forces to run torture centers, and is now allowing Pakistan to be used as a training ground for a possible US attack on Iran.

Even as the Musharraf regime has once again bared its fangs over the past two months, imposing a six-week state of emergency, the US has moved to further strengthen its ties with the Pakistani military.

Last week, the Democratic Party-controlled US Congress approved a further \$785 million in aid for Islamabad for 2008. According to reports in

the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*, under a newly concluded US-Pakistani agreement, several hundred US Special Forces will be deployed to Pakistan in the coming weeks to "train and support indigenous counter-insurgency forces and clandestine counter-terrorism units." (December 26, *Washington Post*)

The working class and the struggle for democracy in Pakistan

The struggle for democracy in Pakistan is a struggle against the US-sponsored and financed military state apparatus and the imperialist-imposed nation-state system in South Asia. It requires the intervention of Pakistan's toiling masses into political life in the fight for basic civil liberties, but also for jobs, public services and support for rural producers—that is, for radical anti-capitalist measures.

In the final analysis, the failure of the Pakistani bourgeoisie to adhere to even the most elementary democratic norms and its recourse time and again to military rule and extra-constitutional measures is rooted in the extreme polarization of wealth within Pakistani society and its subordination to imperialism.

No section of the bourgeois democratic opposition, including the minority of parties that called for an election boycott, is willing or able to make a genuine appeal to the masses, tying the struggle against military rule to the socio-economic grievances of the working class and Pakistan's peasant toilers, above all the agricultural laborers and tenant and share-crop farmers.

This is underscored by the evolution of Bhutto. Over the past year, as opposition to the Musharraf regime became more and more publicly manifest, Bhutto time and again expressed her opposition to any popular agitation against the government, for fear it would escape the political elite's control.

All sections of the bourgeois opposition are dependent on the military to defend their own class privileges against the working class and to maintain the territorial integrity of the crisis-ridden Pakistani state. They are, moreover, tied through a web of financial interconnections to imperialism. They consequently fear and oppose a genuine popular challenge to military rule and imperialist domination.

The growing popular discontent over deepening social inequality, mounting unemployment, food and energy shortages and price rises only makes the bourgeois opposition more disinclined to make any appeal to the Pakistani people to challenge the dictatorship. They are haunted by the fear that the once roused, Pakistan's toilers will not quickly be returned to the shadows and will begin to invest the call for democracy with an egalitarian content that challenges their own privileges.

As part of the struggle to mobilize the masses to bring down the Musharraf dictatorship and break the pernicious political influence of the bourgeois opposition, the working class and socialist-minded students and intellectuals should demand the immediate release of all political prisoners, the scrapping of all press restrictions, the lifting of all prohibitions on political protests and strikes, the dissolution of the Musharraf regime and the holding of genuine elections.

But in doing so, they should reject the entire framework of the ruling class debate over the constitution and democracy, which reduces democracy to the observance of a handful of civil liberties and accepts as a given Pakistan's capitalist order and subservient relationship to the United States and world imperialism.

Genuine democracy requires the liquidation of landlordism, the dismantling of the US sponsored military-security state, the separation of mosque from state, socialist measures to provide jobs and a secure income for all, and the overthrow of the communal state system that imperialism

imposed on South Asia, with the connivance of the Indian National Congress and Muslim League, in 1947-48. It will be realized only in the form of a workers' and peasants' government that consciously links the fate of the toilers of Pakistan and South Asia to the international working class' struggle to put an end to capitalism.

The *World Socialist Web Site* appeals to our readers and supporters in Pakistan and South Asia to begin the fight for a new revolutionary party of the working class—a Pakistani section of the International Committee of the Fourth International—that will prosecute this struggle.



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