

US presidential candidates pledge support to Pakistani dictator

Patrick Martin

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The response of the leading US presidential candidates to the December 27 assassination of former Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto has been to pledge continued American support to the Musharraf military dictatorship, with little more than lip service to the democratic rights of the people of Pakistan.

While offering a variety of criticisms, either of US government policy or of their rivals for the presidential nomination, both Democrats and Republicans embraced the basic framework of the Bush administration's approach, which views the Musharraf regime as the most reliable guarantor of the interests of US imperialism in the region.

Not one of the candidates so much as mentioned the likelihood that the military regime itself organized the murder of Bhutto, either on direct orders from Musharraf himself or by sections of the military-intelligence apparatus, which maintains close ties to Islamic fundamentalist groups.

The Republican candidates cited the apparent suicide bombing as another example of terrorist attacks going back to 9/11, and each sought to posture as the future commander-in-chief most determined to continue the Bush administration's "war on terror."

Former New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani and Senator John McCain of Arizona, who have focused their campaigns on terrorism and the war in Iraq, respectively, were the most fervent in seeking to whip up popular fear for their own political benefit.

Giuliani rushed out a statement calling the Bhutto assassination a "reminder that terrorism anywhere—whether in New York, London, Tel Aviv or Rawalpindi—is an enemy of freedom." His campaign also unveiled a new television commercial including footage of the 9/11 attacks.

McCain openly sought to exploit the event politically,

raising the Pakistani events repeatedly in campaign appearances in Iowa. He boasted of his personal acquaintance with Bhutto and Musharraf, declaring that Bhutto's murder "may serve to enhance those credentials or make people understand that I've been to Waziristan, I know Musharraf, I can pick up the phone and call him."

He told reporters in New Hampshire that he continues "to believe Musharraf has done a pretty good job, done a lot of the things that we wanted him to do." McCain called the Pakistani dictator "personally scrupulously honest," although he heads one of the most corrupt regimes on the planet, in which top military officers routinely end their careers as multimillionaires.

Another leading Republican, former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney, issued a self-contradictory statement asserting that no one knew who was responsible for Bhutto's assassination, while at the same time blaming "global, radical, violent jihadism."

The Republican frontrunner in Iowa, former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee, provided the most parochial response to the Bhutto killing, attempting to link it to the issue of illegal immigration in the United States, an issue on which he has been under fire from his rivals for being insufficiently reactionary.

He claimed that unrest in Pakistan was particularly troubling because "we have more Pakistani illegals coming across our border than all other nationalities, except those immediately south of the border."

Huckabee followed up this bizarre assertion—the total number of Pakistanis detained for illegal entry into the US was only 660 over the most recent four-year period—by warning, "the immigration issue is not so much about people coming across to pick lettuce or make beds, it's about people who can come with a shoulder-fired missile and can do serious damage and

harm to us.”

On the Democratic side of the presidential contest, there were equally brazen efforts to use the Bhutto assassination to score points based on past experience in national security matters. Former senator John Edwards announced that he had spoken with Musharraf on the telephone after the killing, while Senator Joseph Biden, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, cited his own past declarations that nuclear-armed Pakistan is “the most dangerous nation on the planet.”

One Democrat, New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson, called for Musharraf to step down and urged the Bush administration to halt all military aid to Pakistan. He went so far as to link Bhutto’s murder to Musharraf’s declaration of martial law, but when questioned by reporters, Richardson endorsed the consensus view that Al Qaeda terrorists, and not Musharraf, were responsible for the assassination.

Richardson said, “Some of my Democratic opponents have misplaced faith in Musharraf. Like the Bush administration, they cling to the misguided notion that Musharraf can be trusted as an ally to fight terrorism.” This formulation suggests that Musharraf’s main offense was an inadequate military effort against Taliban and Al Qaeda militants in the mountainous Afghanistan-Pakistan border region, not his brutal suppression of the democratic rights of the Pakistani people.

The two Democratic frontrunners, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, each used the Bhutto assassination to argue that the Bush administration had become too preoccupied with the war in Iraq to conduct an effective foreign policy in Afghanistan, South Asia or the world in general.

Clinton noted her past acquaintance with Benazir Bhutto, and criticized the Bush administration for a policy that “put way too much emphasis on Musharraf instead of dealing with broader Pakistani society.” But she declined to endorse Richardson’s call for the removal of Musharraf.

Clinton’s husband, former president Bill Clinton, addressed the issue in apocalyptic language, telling a meeting in Iowa Saturday that unforeseen catastrophes like the Bhutto killing made it necessary to select “a leader who is strong and commanding and convincing enough ... to deal with the unexpected.”

“There is a better than 50 percent chance that

sometime in the first year or 18 months of the next presidency, something will happen that is not being discussed in this campaign,” he said. “And if you’re not ready for that, then everything else you do can be undermined. You need a president that you trust to deal with something that we will not discuss in this campaign.”

Obama cited the Bhutto assassination to bolster his argument that Ms. Clinton was too closely associated with the Bush administration’s foreign policy because of her vote in 2002 to authorize the war in Iraq. “I’ve been saying for some time that we’ve got a very big problem” in Pakistan, Obama said. “We were distracted from focusing on them.” The war in Iraq had “resulted in us taking our eye off the ball” in terms of the struggle against Al Qaeda, he concluded.

Despite his posture as a candidate of “change,” Obama’s position is virtually identical to that espoused by the Democratic presidential candidate in 2004, John Kerry, who argued that the war in Iraq was a diversion from the more important “war” against Al Qaeda and terrorism, which a Democratic administration would wage more effectively than the Republicans. Last summer Obama caused a brief political stir when he advocated a US invasion of Pakistan to capture Osama bin Laden and destroy Taliban and Al Qaeda forces hiding out in the border region.

All of the major presidential candidates, Democrat and Republican alike, stand on a common platform of defending American imperialism. Some Democrats, like Richardson and Obama, emphasize diplomacy and dialogue; others, like Clinton and the Republicans, are more open supporters of military action. But their fundamental goal is the same: upholding the strategic and economic interests of the American financial aristocracy.



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