

Beleaguered Pakistani president lashes out at critics

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Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf is increasingly a man under siege following the December 27 assassination of opposition leader Benazir Bhutto. The official explanation for Bhutto's death is in tatters, raising further questions about the involvement of sections of the regime in her murder and threatening to spark opposition and protests before national elections that have been postponed to February 18.

Video footage showed a gunman close to Bhutto's car, apparently firing at her as she stood waving to supporters through a sunroof. Bhutto slumped back into the car and moments later a blast from a suicide bomber rocked the scene. Eyewitnesses and officials from her Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) insisted that she had been shot. Yet the official investigation claimed that Bhutto had died not from gunshot wounds, but from injuries sustained when her head hit a lever on the car's sunroof.

This scenario served a definite political purpose. Even before the inquiry had started, the regime blamed Al Qaeda for the assassination, claiming it was just another in a string of suicide bombings carried out by the pro-Taliban group headed by Baitullah Mehsud. The presence of a gunman did not fit the pattern, and raised inconvenient questions about his identity. The murder took place in the garrison city of Rawalpindi, where the army headquarters is based.

The assassination provoked days of protests and rioting amid the widespread belief that the government or the military, on which Musharraf rests, was responsible and that the official investigation was a cover-up. Mehsud denied any involvement. Bhutto's husband Asif Ali Zadari refused to give permission for an autopsy, telling the press that he had lived in Pakistan "long enough to know" how such a procedure would be handled.

As the official version of events began to fall apart, Musharraf was forced to accept an offer of assistance from Britain's Scotland Yard to lend some credibility to the police inquiry. He has continued to reject PPP demands for a full international investigation along the lines of the UN probe carried out into the 2005 murder of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik al-Harari.

At a televised press conference for foreign correspondents last Thursday, Musharraf acknowledged for the first time that there were "problems" with investigation and "uncertainty... on exact cause of the death." But he lashed out at suggestions that the security forces were responsible for the assassination, either directly or indirectly through the lack of adequate security measures.

The president declared that he was not completely satisfied with the investigation but insisted that the government had no "plans to conceal evidence". Asked why police had cleaned the area, destroying potential forensic evidence, Musharraf absurdly replied: "Why did they do it? If you are meaning that they did that by design I would say no. It is just inefficiency, people thinking things have to be cleared; traffic has to go through."

After again blaming Islamist groups, Musharraf said it was a "joke" to suggest that the military and intelligence agencies would be using, for their own ends, the same people who were attacking them. "No intelligence organisation of Pakistan is capable of indoctrinating a man to blow himself up," he added.

The very fact that Musharraf is compelled to make such statements is an indication that very few people believe him. The Pakistani military and its powerful Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency have a long association with Islamist organisations, stretching back to the US-backed dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq. The ISI was central to the CIA-sponsored anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s that spawned Al Qaeda along with various armed Islamist militia. It is quite plausible that elements of the government and/or the military collaborated with Al Qaeda-linked groups to eliminate a mutual enemy.

Following the first attempt on her life in October, Bhutto sent a letter to the president naming four figures in his regime—including Chaudhry Pervez Elahi, a former chief minister of Punjab province—as enemies plotting to kill her. The Scotland Yard team has been explicitly barred from interviewing any of the four. At last Thursday's press conference, Musharraf defended the decision, saying: "I will not like anyone to go on a wild-goose chase and start creating a disturbance."

Before her return to Pakistan in October, the Bush administration had been pressing for months for Bhutto and Musharraf to reach a power-sharing deal that would help prop up the unpopular military regime. The possibility that the PPP would win the election and Bhutto become prime minister was bitterly opposed by the ruling Pakistani Muslim League-Q (PML-Q), which stood to lose power and privileges, and provided an obvious motive for its leaders to want her dead.

Musharraf blamed Bhutto herself for ignoring warnings concerning her security. "Who is to blame for her coming out of the vehicle and standing there? Who is to blame? The law enforcement agencies?" he exclaimed. PPP spokeswoman Sherry Rehman said the comments were "ludicrous" and an insult to

Bhutto and the others who died exercising their constitutional right to attend a public rally. Rehman accused the regime of failing to heed Bhutto's requests for better security. She said only one police vehicle had been present and "that day, I hardly saw any police".

US backing

Musharraf's defensive responses at last week's press conference underline his regime's political crisis. He is heavily dependent on the continuing political and financial support of the Bush administration, which is demanding that Pakistan intensify the escalating war against Islamist militias in the tribal areas along the border with Afghanistan. Musharraf's support for Washington's so-called "war on terror" has resulted in broad anti-American sentiment and alienated sections of the military.

President Bush again offered his full support for the Pakistani strongman, telling Reuters on Thursday: "I've always been a supporter of President Musharraf. I believe he is strong in the war on terror. He understands clearly the risks of dealing with extremists and terrorists. After all, they've tried to kill him." In his weekly radio address on Saturday, Bush insisted that the US and Pakistan had to use "every necessary tool of intelligence, law enforcement, diplomacy, finance, and military power to bring our common enemies to justice".

The *New York Times* revealed yesterday that top White House officials, including Vice President Dick Cheney, had met on Friday to discuss far more aggressive US covert operations inside Pakistan (see: "Secret White House meeting plans US military escalation in Pakistan"). Any move in this direction will only further destabilise the tribal areas and fuel anti-American opposition more broadly, compounding the political difficulties besetting the Pakistani regime.

Reflecting concerns in European ruling circles, the Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG) issued a policy briefing on January 2 calling on Washington to end its backing for Musharraf. There are clearly fears that the Pakistani president's blatant anti-democratic methods, including the imposition of emergency rule and the stacking of the courts, are creating the conditions for a social and political explosion in the country.

"It is time for the international community, and particularly the US, to reconsider its support for authoritarian rule in Pakistan and recognise that democracy, not an artificially propped-up, defrocked and widely despised general, has the best chance of providing stability and turning back the gains of Islamic extremists," the report stated. The ICG's harsher criticisms of Musharraf may indicate a turn by the EU toward a more concerted involvement in the country.

The ICG briefing provoked a furious reaction in Islamabad. A government spokesman branded the call for Musharraf's removal as biased and amounting to "promoting sedition". He denounced the ICG as having no credibility and lacking "representational standing, specially on Pakistan's national affairs". Although the Pakistani regime is not in a position to take action against the ICG,

the use of the term "sedition" is calculated to intimidate opposition leaders and the media.

While he has formally lifted the state of emergency imposed in November, Musharraf has continued to crack down on political opposition. The Pakistani-based *News on Sunday* quoted a senior government official as saying that the government had launched a crackdown on PPP activists involved in the rioting after Bhutto's assassination. He estimated that "the figures could go up to even 10,000" and declared there would be "no leniency for causing damages worth billions of rupees".

Formal complaints had been lodged against thousands of people in various cities and "preliminary investigations" were already taking place. The official said the government had given strict directions to the authorities in Sindh province—Bhutto's base—to severely deal with "senior and junior government officials who showed negligence or simply abandoned their duties during the protest".

An article in the *New York Times* on Saturday detailed the regime's efforts to muzzle and intimidate lawyers who led the protest movement against Musharraf's purging of the judiciary. Aitzaz Ahsan remains under house arrest in Lahore, barred from speaking to outsiders, including the US and British ambassadors to Pakistan who recently tried to meet him at his home. His friend and collaborator Muneer Malik was able to speak to the press, but was physically weak after three weeks in jail, during which he nearly died—due to dehydration, malnutrition and the presence of unknown toxins, according to Malik's doctors.

Yesterday, more than 250 people, including lawyers and other activists, protested near Aitzaz Ahsan's home, demanding the restoration of the judges removed in last month's purge. But widespread demonstrations appear to have temporarily subsided, in large measure because the PPP and other opposition parties have accepted the decision to delay elections and avoid any political confrontation with the regime.

Musharraf's defensive reaction to criticism, however, particularly over the investigation into Bhutto's assassination, demonstrates that the crisis for his beleaguered regime is far from over.



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