

Lahore bombing casts pall over Pakistani election

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A bomb blast in the eastern Pakistani city of Lahore on Thursday has cast fresh doubt over national elections due on February 18. The poll has been delayed once already on the pretext that some election offices were damaged in rioting that followed the assassination of opposition leader Benazir Bhutto on December 27.

The bombing took place outside the city's high court building. Most of the dead and injured were riot police who had gathered in preparation for a demonstration by lawyers against President Pervez Musharraf's purging of the judiciary. The official death toll has been revised down to 19, of whom 16 were police, and 62 injured.

Details of the bombing are still unclear. Police announced that a suicide bomber detonated a large bomb strapped to his body, and gathered body parts for identification. Accounts vary as to how the bomber arrived—by foot or by motorbike—and whether he rammed police lines or blew himself up when challenged. One police constable told Pakistan's *Dawn* newspaper the bomb had gone off while police were trying to remove a white Suzuki car parked near their ranks.

No organisation has claimed responsibility. Interior ministry spokesman Javed Iqbal Cheema quickly pointed the finger at Al Qaeda-linked Islamic extremists who have carried out a series of suicide bombings in recent months following the army's storming of the Red Mosque in Islamabad last July. "It's too early to say who was involved but it's certainly part of the same wave of suicide bombings," he told the press.

It is not even certain, however, who was the target. It is possible that the bomb was aimed at the opposition rally, rather than the police. Lawyers taking part in the protest told the *Daily Times*: "The explosion took place

about 10 minutes before hundreds of lawyers gathered at GPO Chowk [next to the high court]. If the bomber struck us, the death toll would have been manifold."

In comments to the *New York Times*, lawyer Ali Ahsan blamed the government, saying: "It is a tragic incident, clearly the finger of blame goes to the establishment." He expressed the view that the blast was the result of a timed explosive device and was surprised that the Lahore police had concluded that a suicide bomber was involved. Ali Ahsan is the son of Aitzaz Ahshan, a leader of the lawyers' anti-government protests, who is currently under house arrest.

Opposition politicians have also blamed the government. Pakistani Peoples Party (PPP) leaders declared that the "[Lahore] blast might be a conspiracy to sabotage the lawyers' movement and delay the polls further," the *News* reported. PPP secretary general Jehangir Badar charged that the attack was an "attempt to destabilise the country". The other main opposition party, the Pakistan Muslim League- N (PML-N), said the "bloodshed would continue until President Musharraf's resignation".

Widespread suspicion that the regime is involved, directly or indirectly, in such atrocities has been fuelled by the circumstances surrounding Benazir Bhutto's assassination. Police and government spokesmen claimed that Bhutto had died when she hit her head on the lever of her car at a PPP election rally in the garrison city of Rawalpindi. Video and eyewitness accounts indicated that a gunman had shot Bhutto before a bomb blast.

As the credibility of the Pakistani investigation collapsed, Musharraf was forced to ask for the assistance of a team from Britain's Scotland Yard. Despite the Pakistani president's denials, it is quite

possible that Bhutto's murder was orchestrated by elements of the military or government, who have longstanding connections to armed Islamist groups and saw her as a threat to their own power and privileges. The Bush administration had been pressing Musharraf and Bhutto for months to reach a powersharing arrangement to help prop up the deeply unpopular military-backed regime.

The opposition parties have criticised Musharraf for delaying elections following Bhutto's assassination but have promised to participate. In doing so, they are lending credibility to a tottering regime that continues to use police-state measures against its opponents. The PPP and PML-N have made clear they have no intention of confronting the regime by mobilising opposition in the course of the campaign.

Musharraf is nevertheless nervous that his Pakistan Muslim League (PML-Q) will be badly beaten in any elections. In an interview with the Singapore-based *Straits Times*, he said he would resign as president if the opposition parties sought to impeach him after the poll. To impeach the president, a two-thirds vote in parliament is necessary.

The threat of election violence is therefore useful to the regime as a means of intimidating voters, cracking down on opposition protests and rallies, and providing a pretext for a stepped-up military and police presence. Following the Lahore blast, the government announced that the army would be deployed in 22 districts in the province of Punjab. Home Secretary Khusrao Pervaiz Khan said soldiers would be stationed at designated places for deployment at one hour's notice.

Speaking on the television program "Aiwan-i-Sadr sey", Musharraf indicated that the government would keep the opposition on a tight rein. While paying lip service to the need for "free, fair and transparent election," he added: "But one should be very clear. We will not allow any agitation, before or after the elections." The president lashed out at suggestions that his government would rig the election, saying that those making the allegations should show "civilised behaviour".

Musharraf's record since he seized power in an army coup in 1999 is anything but civilised. The military has rigged elections, imposed anti-democratic measures, flouted the constitution and ruthlessly suppressed political opponents. Just two months ago, the regime

suspended the constitution, imposed emergency rule, arrested hundreds of people and purged the judiciary. The emergency has since been lifted, but many anti-democratic measures remain in place.

In the aftermath of the Lahore bombing, Information Minister Nisar Memon declared: "We want to make it very clear that the elections will be held as scheduled." Already, however, the regime has employed the spurious excuse of damage to election offices to delay the poll once. Should it suit his political purposes, Musharraf is quite capable of exploiting an event like the Lahore blast to announce another postponement.



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