

Pakistan's former US-backed dictator indicted for Benazir Bhutto's murder

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A Pakistani court Tuesday indicted the country's former military strongman, ex-president Pervez Musharraf, for the murder of former prime minister and Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) leader Benazir Bhutto. The decision by the current government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to allow the prosecution of Musharraf, a major ally of the US in its "war on terror" and a former chief of the country's powerful military, could have significant political consequences.

Charges of "murder, criminal conspiracy for murder and facilitation for murder" were laid against Musharraf in a closed session of a Rawalpindi anti-terrorism court. The charges carry the death sentence or life imprisonment. Six others, two senior police officers and four suspected militants, were also indicted.

Musharraf reportedly denied the charges. Prior to the indictment, he claimed the case was "politically motivated." His spokesmen, Raza Bokhari, dismissed the charges as "false, fabricated and fictitious."

Bhutto was killed in December 2007 while she was campaigning for national and provincial assembly elections. She returned from exile two months before her assassination on a deal masterminded in Washington to prop up the Musharraf regime. The US was troubled by the existence of mass opposition to Musharraf for lending support to the American-led occupation of Afghanistan, punitive military actions directed at anti-occupation militants operating in Pakistan, and his rigorous implementation of pro-market policies imposed by the International Monetary Fund. However, the deal that the US attempted to broker regarding Bhutto's return started to unravel from the get go, with Musharraf and his cronies loath to share power. An initial attempt was made on her life the day of her return to the country.

Earlier this year, the army reportedly tried to dissuade

Musharraf from returning from self-exile to contest the general election held in Pakistan in May 2013, indicating that it considered him a spent political force and that it would create a problem for the military if he were arrested. Despite these warnings, in March 2013 Musharraf returned to Pakistan, where he was placed under house arrest in April on charges arising from two other cases. The military has so far remained silent about the indictment of its former leader. Despite differences that exist within this layer with Musharraf, his indictment must have rung alarm bells in the military-intelligence establishment, which has ruled Pakistan for half of its existence and continues to claim to be the final arbiter in the country's foreign and security policy.

Even though Prime Minister Sharif began his political career as a protégé of the US-backed dictator General Zia-ul Haq, his relations with the army sharply deteriorated following his ouster in the 1999 military coup that brought Musharraf to power. In an attempt to bridge distrust with the army, following his election Sharif made clear that he held Musharraf alone culpable for the coup, thereby absolving the military establishment of its role in the matter.

Sharif's statement came after army chief Ashfaq Kayani expressed dissatisfaction over how Musharraf has been treated by civilian authorities during his house arrest. An article published by Reuters noted that Kayani's statement that "retribution" would not end "this game of hide and seek between democracy and dictatorship" was a sign of displeasure over Musharraf's detention. Sharif and Kayani privately held hours of discussions over the matter.

However, despite the views of local and foreign analysts that the indictment is "symbolic" and will not result in a sentence for Musharraf, there is general

agreement that tensions between the military and Sharif's government have escalated. "The fact that he has been indicted may be seen negatively by the army," commented Hasan Askari Rizvi, a prominent political analyst. "The army will view it with some concern, but they will stay quiet for the time being and see how things proceed and to what extent not only Musharraf but the institution as a whole gets dragged in."

According to the *Financial Times*, "the Obama administration had privately urged Mr Sharif's government not to prosecute Mr Musharraf, fearing that intensifying political infighting in Pakistan could disturb Washington's planned withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan next year."

Remarks by Lisa Curtis, a specialist at the right-wing Heritage Foundation in Washington, in an article on August 20, hint of the possibility of some sort of backdoor deal between the US and Pakistani governments over the fate of Musharraf. Arguing that "sentencing Musharraf to a harsh prison sentence or capital punishment is unjustified," Curtis speculated, "Kayani would try to broker a deal behind the scenes that forces Musharraf to leave the country but spares his life and keeps him out of a Pakistani prison."

The US' desire to defend Musharraf, similar to its concerns over growing tensions along the India-Pakistan border, is rooted in its geopolitical interests in the region. Regarding Pakistan as a junior partner, Washington maintains separate relationships with the military and the civilian government, as it pursues its aims. In addition, Musharraf was a major player in the US "war on terror," allowing, for instance, the use of Pakistan as a site for offshore CIA torture operations and American drone strikes in the border region with Afghanistan. Washington may not yet be prepared to fully endorse the prosecution of one of its most loyal flunkies and is also likely concerned about what Musharraf knows about the US' criminal operations in the region.

A genuine probe of the circumstances surrounding Bhutto's assassination is highly unlikely, as any investigation would also have to take up Washington's statement soon after the attack that Al Qaeda and the Taliban were responsible.

Evidence, however, points to the involvement of the Pakistani security services. The attack took place in the garrison city of Rawalpindi, where security is usually

tight. Hours after the assassination the entire scene, including the car inside which Bhutto died, was cleaned up and all evidence destroyed. Further raising suspicions about the involvement of the military-intelligence apparatus, the prosecutor who handled the case previously was gunned down in Islamabad by "unidentified" attackers in May of this year.

Heraldo Muñoz, who led a United Nations' investigation into the murder, wrote an article in *Foreign Affairs* recounting his discussions with Kayani and then Pakistan Inter-Services Intelligence Director Shuja Pasha about the Bhutto murder. "Suspicious of the ISI's—or at least of some retired officers or rogue members of the agency—involvement in the assassination were not unfounded," he remarked. He said Kayani did not believe that the Taliban was behind the assassination.

The judiciary for its part has a record of politically motivated rulings. Despite its ultimate fallout with Musharraf, it has been an ardent backer of military dictatorships.

Islamabad will be embroiled in further political turmoil if Sharif indicts Musharraf on treason charges. The government is presently preparing a case that deals with the 1999 coup, as well as suspension of the constitution in November 2007.

The charged political atmosphere in Pakistan could also intensify due to the flaring up of clashes with India along the disputed Kashmiri border. The Pakistani army has fought three wars over Kashmir, the last of which, the undeclared war in Kargil in 1999, was followed by the coup that ousted Sharif.



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