

Benazir Bhutto, 1953-2007, assassinated in Rawalpindi

Friday 28 December 2007, by [Financial Times](#), [HAIDER Ejaz](#), [MUFTI Shahan](#), [RAZVI Murtaza](#), [SAPPENFIELD Mark](#), [SARWAR Beena](#), [SHAMSIE Kamila](#), [The Hindu](#) (Date first published: 28 December 2007).

We are reproducing below a selection of first analysis and comments selected by the South Asia Citizens Wire on the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, 27 December 2007, in Rawalpindi.

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PAKISTAN: BENAZIR BHUTTO - THE ULTIMATE SACRIFICE

Inter Press Service

by Beena Sarwar (27 December 2007)

LAHORE (Dec 27): Benazir Bhutto has paid the heaviest price possible for her insistence on engaging in participatory, democratic politics in Pakistan. Bhutto was killed on Thursday evening in what was apparently a suicide bombing following gunshots that injured her as she was leaving a pre-election rally she had just addressed in the garrison town of Rawalpindi.

Twice-elected former prime minister Benazir Bhutto, the 54-year old mother of three children, died in hospital in Rawalpindi at about 6.15 pm – barely an hour after an unidentified man fired shots at her as she left the rally venue, a fenced off park, before blowing himself up. Some twenty others were killed and dozens more injured.

"She feared something like this would happen, but she was so brave," said PPP spokesperson Farhatullah Babar, who was with Benazir Bhutto at the rally minutes before the tragedy struck, speaking to IPS from Rawalpindi shortly before Bhutto's body was transferred to her hometown Larkana on a C-130 plane. "She waved at the people, and then there was firing and the blast." "I don't think people realize this, but she was one of the last hopes we had in Pakistan for a peaceful transition to democracy," said Karachi-based economist Haris Gazdar, who supported Bhutto's much-criticised 'deal' with the military government that allowed her to return to the country and participate in politics.

President and Chief of Army Staff General Pervez Musharraf's National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO) promulgated on Oct. 5, a day before the presidential elections that he was a nominee for despite being in military uniform, gave Bhutto immunity against corruption charges brought against her after she was ousted from power in 1996 (none of these charges were proved in court). In return, her Pakistan People's Party (PPP) lent the election legitimacy by abstaining from the vote - the rest of the opposition boycotted the proceedings.

Explaining his support for Bhutto, Gazdar added, "The Americans think we are a dangerous state, and they want to come and sort things out here. This was a chance to do this peacefully... Make no mistake about it, the state is responsible for her death. They may think that by removing the vehicle for a peaceful change, they can stop the change. But that will not happen. Now that the peaceful mediator has been killed, they (Americans) will use armed force." "I was nine when ZAB was killed by a General. Now my son is nine and another general has killed his daughter. I grew up with Benazir. It's a personal loss. I want to cry forever," text-messaged a lawyer in Lahore. The military regime of General Ziaul Haq overthrew and later executed the democratically elected prime minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto (ZAB), Benazir's father, in 1979.

News of the tragic incident ignited violence all over the country, particularly in Sindh, Bhutto's home province. "They've shut down all the shops, and there is firing all around," said Abdul

Jabbar who works as a driver in the Sindh capital and Pakistan's largest city and business center Karachi. "People are just overcome with grief."

By 9 pm, violence had claimed at least five lives in Karachi. Protestors in Sindh evacuated two trains and set them on fire. Angry mobs attacked police stations and other symbols of state authority. Commuters were reported to be stranded in towns and cities all over the province.

Benazir Bhutto had chosen to return to Pakistan after almost nine years of exile, leaving a comfortable life of exile in London and Dubai, defying warnings by Musharraf to delay her arrival due to the danger of suicide attacks.

"This is why I am here," she said, radiant atop her armoured truck soon after her arrival from Dubai at Karachi on Oct 18. Waving to the sea of people that surrounded her truck as far as the eye could see, she added as thousands of arms rose in response, "These people are the reason I am here."

Hours later, her slow-moving convoy bogged down by thousands of exuberant supporters on foot had only covered a few kilometers when two bombs struck soon after midnight. Initially thought to be a suicide attack, the blasts claimed over 130 lives and 500 injuries.

Addressing a press conference the following day, a defiant Bhutto implied the involvement of Pakistan's intelligence agencies in the attacks by mentioning three anonymous men whom she said she had named in a letter of Oct 16 to Musharraf. "I said that if something happens to me, I will hold them responsible rather than militant groups like the Taliban, Al Qaeda or the Pakistani Taliban."

The PPP also demanded the removal of the Intelligence Bureau chief, Ijaz Shah, hinting at Pakistani intelligence agencies' linkage with militancy. Bhutto's later claim that the Oct 18 blasts were remote-controlled further implied the involvement of forces other than the 'religious militants' who are traditionally held responsible for such acts.

Despite the threats, Bhutto hit the campaign trail after the Election Commission announced on Nov 20 that polls would be held on January 8, 2008. With elections barely two weeks away, Bhutto was engaged in a series of public rallies around the country. Also on the campaign trail was her major political rival, another twice-elected former prime minister who like Bhutto had recently returned from several years of exile, Nawaz Sharif of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N). Despite their political rivalry, the two leaders had developed what Sharif termed as a "rapport" over the last couple of years. In May 2006, the two exiled leaders in London signed a Charter of Democracy aimed at pushing the military out of Pakistani politics.

Speaking to the media from the hospital in Rawalpindi where he arrived soon after hearing of the incident, Bhutto's death, Sharif termed it as "very tragic". He said that the tragedy reflected a "lapse in security" and said that the government should have taken greater measures to protect her.

As they embarked on their election campaigns, the two leaders drew huge crowds marked by a passion that the 'kings' party', the Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q) was unable to muster. The campaigning was also marked by violence. Several political workers, mostly PPP, died in various incidents. On Dec 20, a suicide bomb in a mosque in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) killed over 20 people and injured 200 in an attack apparently aimed at former PPP stalwart and ex-interior minister Aftab Sherpao. On Dec 27, barely three hours before the blast that killed Bhutto, gunfire killed four PML-N supporters in a welcome rally for Nawaz Sharif outside the capital city Islamabad.

Bhutto's decision to contest elections "under protest" went against the move to boycott the polls, initiated by 'civil society'-lawyers, students, human rights activists, non-government organisations and the smaller political parties - who argued that participating in the elections would only legitimize Musharraf's role in Pakistani politics. Bhutto maintained that a boycott would not solve anything. Her stand forced Sharif to reconsider his initial position

and announce that his party would contest rather than boycotting the polls.

The participation of these political forces posed a major challenge to the PML-Q which ruled the roost along with Musharraf for five years since the 2002 general elections – that Bhutto and Sharif had both been barred from contesting. Democratic electoral politics were also expected to push back the 'jihadists', the right-wing religious parties who had joined hands as the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) and made significant electoral inroads during the 2002 elections. MMA was also weakened by internal divisions as some of its components were in the boycott camp while others were contesting elections.

Bhutto's assassination "sends a very frightening signal to those who aim to pursue liberal politics in Pakistan," commented Ali Dayan Hasan, Pakistan-based South Asia Researcher for Human Rights Watch. "This will leave a huge vacuum at the heart of Pakistani politics. It is the most significant political event to happen in Pakistan since the death of General Zia." Gen. Zia's death in 1988 had paved the way for fresh elections that brought Benazir Bhutto into power as the world's first Muslim woman prime minister. Condoling with Bhutto's family and other affected people in a brief, televised address, President Musharraf announced a three-day mourning period during which the Pakistani flag will be flown at half-mast.

"It is important now for Asif Ali Zardari (Bhutto's husband) to call for peace, and to give Benazir Bhutto a decent burial that she deserves," said Nusrat Javeed, the banned head of current affairs for Aaj Television who appeared in a special transmission along with another banned host, Talat Hussain. "We need to sit and think, and transform the grief and the anger into strength." (ends)

BEYOND BELIEF

The Guardian

December 27, 2007

In exile, in power, in opposition, Benazir Bhutto was ever present. It is hard to imagine Pakistani politics without her

by Kamila Shamsie

A few hours ago I was talking to my sister in Karachi, asking her if she knew whether or not my name was on the electoral role. It's been one of the features of my nomadic life - and of Pakistan's sporadic forays into elections - that I've never been in Pakistan during elections since I was too young to vote. That there was no one running who I had any interest in voting for - my most recent notion was to write in "Chewbacca" - and that rumour had it that massive pre-poll rigging was under way didn't entirely destroy my desire to be present and participating on polling day itself.

I ended the phone call - without any conclusive news about my presence on the electoral role - and logged on to Geo TV's live streaming bulletins. While the news anchors were talking about rising prices of commodities the banner running across the bottom of the screen announced a suicide attacks at Benazir Bhutto's rally in Rawalpindi.

I thought it was a horrific comment on the frequency of such attacks in Pakistan that it wasn't reason to cut to live reporting. And obviously, I recall thinking, Benazir is fine. Always the massive security around the leadership - and the poor supporters get the brunt of the violence. For the space of a few seconds I stopped to imagine an alternative scenario, but then I brushed the thought away.

Impossible: despite the October 18 attack on her homecoming rally, despite knowing how many people must want her dead, it was still impossible to imagine Benazir as anything other than an insistent presence in the world of Pakistani politics. In exile, in power, in opposition - but always present, always a factor. It had been that

way since Zia-ul-Haq took power in 1977, when I was four years old. I've never known a Pakistan in which hers wasn't a name to conjure with.

A few minutes later Geo was reporting that Benazir had left the rally just prior to the explosion. Of course, I thought, and logged off.

And so when a Pakistani friend called from a small village in Devon to say "Benazir's dead" my first reaction was to simply disbelieve her.

She must have heard there was a suicide blast at the rally and incorrectly surmised Benazir had been caught up in it. But no, she insisted and insisted again - and then my phone's display showed another call coming through from a friend in Karachi, and I knew.

A little later a friend from Calcutta texted his horror at the news, but added, "It's the least surprising assassination since Malcolm X."

If that's so, why is it that every one of my compatriots I speak to can find little to say beyond, "I can't believe it."

What happens next? Only two things are certain: whatever happens, Benazir will continue to be an insistent presence in Pakistan's politics for quite a while; and it is a tremendously bleak day for Pakistan.

BHUTTO'S DEATH ROCKS PAKISTAN

The Christian Science Monitor - December 28, 2007 edition

The assassination of the former prime minister raises questions about the Musharraf government's security measures.

by Shahan Mufti and Mark Sappenfield

ISLAMABAD, PAKISTAN; AND NEW DELHI - The assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto by a suicide bomber Thursday threatens to bring to a halt Pakistan's stuttering steps toward democracy.

It is the starkest evidence yet that the forces aligned against law and order, once contained to the remote border region with Afghanistan, are now spilling into the heart of Pakistan, disrupting the country's ability to function.

The death of Ms. Bhutto, one of Pakistan's most beloved leaders and head of its largest political party, is an emotional event for many. Rioting broke out in several cities late Thursday night. The unrest could lead to the declaration of martial law, experts say, and the postponement of parliamentary elections scheduled for Jan. 8, 2008.

It is the sort of instability that Western nations had sought to avoid by persuading President Pervez Musharraf to allow Bhutto back into the country - hoping her vows to tackle terrorism would help in the fight against Taliban militants and put Pakistan on a more moderate path. Now, they appear to have made her a target. Her death marks a moment of decision for Pakistan's leaders and lays bare the terrorists' capabilities.

"Her death in such a manner - when the government had taken responsibility for her security - tells a lot about the situation in Pakistan," says Hassan Abbas, a Pakistan expert at Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass. "What is evident is a complete lack of command and control."

It brings a close to a year drawn in persistent, violent turmoil. Details of Bhutto's death - the Muslim world's first female prime minister - were not yet confirmed at press time, but reports suggest she was shot before a suicide bomber blew himself up. The attack took place minutes after she had finished her address at a large rally in the garrison city of Rawalpindi, near the capital, Islamabad.

The killing of Bhutto leaves a question mark over whether elections can go forward. A political field without her will profoundly affect the larger political dynamic that Mr. Musharraf has been carefully crafting to remain in power. But more immediately, the death of one of Pakistan's most prominent political leaders has shaken the country. "The country has been pushed into another dark period of uncertainty," says Rasul Baksh Rais, a political scientist at the Lahore University of Management Sciences.

Riots erupted in Rawalpindi soon after the news of her death was confirmed. The city has been the site of several suicide bombings in past months, though most have targeted security forces. Private television channels also reported riots in major towns across the country, especially in Sindh, Bhutto's home province.

The magnitude of Bhutto's death obscured another act of political violence Thursday. Four supporters of Bhutto's opposition, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), were shot dead at a political rally in Islamabad.

"I think the elections will be canceled," says Ahmed Rashid, a Pakistani security analyst and author of "Taliban." "We can't have elections when the country is in this state of violence. We may see the imposition ... of extraordinary measures like martial law or a state of emergency."

In an interview with the BBC, PML-N leader Nawaz Sharif also hinted that elections could be postponed: "None of us is inclined to think about the election."

It is unclear who was responsible for the attack, but initial anger turned against Musharraf's government.

Supporters outside the hospital where Bhutto's body was taken chanted "dog, Musharraf, dog," the Associated Press reported.

It is an instinctive reaction born of generations of mutual mistrust between Bhutto and the Army, which Musharraf led until last month. Bhutto's father, also a prime minister, was hanged after being deposed by one of Pakistan's previous military rulers, Zia ul-Haq.

Certainly, the threat was not unforeseen. When Bhutto returned from exile in October in a triumphant procession through Karachi, she narrowly escaped a suicide bombing that left 150 dead. Moreover, Baitullah Mesud, a Taliban commander in Waziristan, had several times openly threatened her life.

The circumstances of Bhutto's death, and the failure of security, will be a subject of immense scrutiny. "There are going to be very big questions asked," says Najmuddin Shaikh, who served as foreign minister during one of Bhutto's terms as prime minister.

Bhutto was the only major political figure whose campaign included a strong stance against extremism. "Benazir Bhutto may have been killed by terrorists, but the terrorists must not be allowed to kill democracy in Pakistan," British Prime Minister Gordon Brown said Thursday. But Dr. Abbas at Harvard predicts "fewer people will challenge extremism openly."

Bhutto's life and career followed a trail of tragedy in her political family comparable to that of the Kennedys, or Gandhis of India. Bhutto died just a few miles from where her father was hanged. One brother died from poisoning, and another was killed in a police shootout. Her two tenures as prime minister (1988 and 1993), neither of which she could complete, were marred by charges of corruption and fraud. She went into exile after Musharraf came into power in 1999 before returning in October.

Bhutto declared herself lifetime chairman of the party she inherited from her father. Observers are unsure who might take over the reins of the party now.

"It may take months for the party to decide their new leader," says Hassan Aksari Rizvi, an independent political scientist in Lahore. "I don't see how they can contest an election scheduled in a few days without a coherent leadership."

David Montero contributed from Lahore, Pakistan.

<http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/1228/p01s01-wosc.html>

AFTER BENAZIR

Indian Express

December 28, 2007

***Whoever did this wants two things: create unrest
through violence; and get the elections postponed
sine die.***

by Ejaz Haider

Benazir Bhutto is dead, assassinated. A grave tragedy, this could likely have even graver consequences. She was walking back to her vehicle after addressing a rally at Rawalpindi's Liaquat Bagh on December 27 when, according to reports, a man approached her, started shooting and then blew himself up. The bullet that entered her neck proved fatal.

That Bhutto was attacked is not surprising; it wasn't the first time. What is surprising is that someone could so easily get close to her and had enough time to start shooting before activating his suicide belt.

Who could have done it? The answer to this obvious question, unfortunately, is not so obvious. If motive is the benchmark, culprits can range from the rightwing elements - Al-Qaeda and its affiliate groups had repeatedly threatened to take her out - to her political rivals, to elements within the establishment and intelligence agencies. Anyone, singly or in tandem, could be behind this murderous act.

Bhutto had, after the gruesome Karachi bombings, pointed the finger at what she called the "Zia remnants"; later, however, she had decided not to press with that line. But the manner in which Pakistan's politics is configured, the PPP rank and file will entertain no other thought except that the dark deed was committed by Bhutto's rivals - and rivals range from the army (for whom Bhutto was a bete noire) to intelligence agencies, to right-of-centre political parties, to the extremist groups on the loose.

PPP cadres are already in a foul mood and in the coming days the possibility of increasing violence in the party's strongholds cannot be discounted. The consequences of Bhutto's assassination have to be seen on the basis of the vertical fault-line that has historically run through Pakistan's politics and where the army has overtly and covertly tried to do everything possible to keep the PPP on the margins since its very inception (the former director-general of Inter-Services Intelligence, Lt Gen Hamid Gul, has publicly confessed that he put together the Islami Jamhoori Ittehad in 1988 to thwart the PPP).

Even now, while President Pervez Musharraf began to make overtures to the PPP, partly because he realised that the next phase of politics would require a much stronger PPP presence and partly because the Americans pushed him in that direction, Musharraf's allies were extremely unhappy. It doesn't bear repeating that Musharraf presides over a system where many functionaries of the government are not particularly enamoured either of his policy of alliance with the US or his idea of cultural liberalism and moderation.

An alliance between Musharraf and Bhutto, even one based on self-interest, was not in the interest of such players. That her rally in Karachi was targeted within hours of her landing on Pakistan's soil shows that these elements meant business. It also proved that they considered her a grave threat and would strike again.

Turmoil suits extremist groups; the absence of Bhutto suits some political groups as well as some elements within the establishment. But unlike the extremist groups, those who are in this game to seek power must realise that some basic rules of the game are important all round - for themselves as well as the rivals. Without *règle du jeu*, the country can never acquire the stability which makes politics the only profitable game in town.

Where does Pakistan go from here?

That's the question now and its answer will depend on Musharraf. He will have to make a decision and a smart one. And the only sensible decision is to not postpone the elections. Whoever did this wants two things: create unrest through violence; and get the elections postponed sine die. The postponement of elections will only increase the possibility of violence by signalling to an already bereaved PPP rank and file that the dastardly act of killing Bhutto was aimed at eliminating a political threat and keeping the country away from democracy.

In fact, the only way Musharraf can show his sincerity and even get himself, the army and perhaps his political allies absolved of the accusations that will now fly thick and fast, such being the nature of Byzantine politics, is

to go ahead with the elections.

The talk about imposing another emergency will be akin to playing with fire. Investigations into this tragedy need sincerity, not a blanket imposition of drastic measures curtailing basic rights, not least because emergency in and of itself can have no impact on the efficacy of investigations intended to unearth the culprits who did this. Indeed, imposition of emergency and postponement of elections will serve to do just the opposite: convince the PPP cadres as also the majority of Pakistanis that Bhutto was targeted only so the ancien regime could carry on merrily.

This is a death whose shadow will linger over Pakistani politics for many years to come. There's also a lesson here for those who have ruled Pakistan for so long and defied the logic of establishing a succession principle. If Pakistan were a stable state, this death would still be mourned but no one would consider even a tragedy as big as this to be the undoing of the state itself.

Bhutto was fighting for just such stability; the only way to honour her and her sacrifice is for the country to return to democracy and to the creation of a legal-normative framework. And the first step to that is free and fair elections.

President Musharraf has announced a three-day mourning and appealed to Pakistanis to stay calm. By not announcing emergency measures, he seems to be signalling that elections will go ahead as planned.

'HER DEATH HAS LEFT A VACUUM IN PAK POLITICS WHICH WILL BE IMPOSSIBLE TO FILL'

Indian Express

December 28, 2007

by Murtaza Razvi

What utter madness. And what a disgrace for Pakistan. The country will not be the same anymore

without Benazir Bhutto. With her death, gone are the hopes of millions of her supporters spread across the length and breadth of the country; those whose eyes shone in Karachi on October 18 when she returned.

Two of Sindh's most brilliant and promising leaders have now been killed in Punjab. This does not augur well for Sindh-Punjab relations, or inter-provincial relations for that matter, which at the best of times have been far from smooth. This, in a country managed by its generals even if a facade of people's representation is allowed to come to the fore.

Rawalpindi, the headquarters of the Pakistan Army, has so far claimed the lives of three of the country's prime ministers. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was hanged here in 1977; Liaquat Ali Khan, like Benazir, was assassinated in 1951 after being shot at close range at the same venue: the old Company Bagh, later rechristened as Liaquat Bagh.

Ever since her return to Pakistan, Bhutto had complained of not being provided adequate security. Her party spokesperson, Shery Rehman, time and again accused the government of soft-peddling on the issue and making light of the threat Bhutto believed she faced from Islamist militants or even intelligence agencies. It is no secret that the latter very much have a life of their own, one that does not always reflect stated government policy.

In the case of Bhutto's security, the state reluctantly provided jamming devices to the police escorting her motor trips out of her fortified home in Karachi. According to Rehman, the jamming device never worked, and the October 18 attempt on Bhutto's life in Karachi was cited as a potent example.

Bhutto's assassination now puts a big question mark on the January 8 elections. Her party has been virtually left adrift, with no consensus party head under whose banner the second and third-tier PPP leadership can stay united — not that Bhutto allowed such a cadre to emerge while she was in exile. A clear split within Pakistan's most popular party is on the cards. The PPP is likely to dig its roots deeper in Bhutto's home province of Sindh while dumping its leaders in Punjab. With Bhutto gone, the Punjab PPP belongs as much in the past as the party's founding fathers, who founded the party in Lahore under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's leadership, back in tumultuous 1967.

Will Musharraf be able to control the situation that will now ensue in the aftermath of Bhutto's assassination? Not very likely. Rural Sindh's grief and anger will be well near impossible to contain. Any misadventure there on the part of the military can have dire repercussions.

Karachi, Sindh's capital and the country's economic hub, is perhaps at the highest risk of being dragged into violence, given the history of lawlessness in a city which on the whole had little love lost for Bhutto.

The vacuum created in Pakistan's politics will be impossible to fill, for unlike after her father's assassination, there is no heir apparent to the Bhuttos' political legacy. Her children are too young to play any political role any time soon. Other factions of the PPP led by breakaway leaders, including Benazir's slain brother Murtaza's Syrian-born widow, are not a patch on her popularity. The party's one-time stalwart in the Frontier province, Aftab Sherpao, who also has been targeted by Islamist militants twice in the last seven months, is closer to Musharraf and the army than to the old, die-hard Bhutto fans. Sherpao was the interior minister in the last government.

— The writer is a Karachi-based editor with *Dawn*

<http://www.indianexpress.com/story/255100.html>

MURDEROUS BLOW TO PAKISTAN'S STABILITY

Financial Times

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The assassination on Thursday of Benazir Bhutto, the twice former prime minister of Pakistan who was staging a formidable comeback from exile ahead of elections next month, is a disaster for a country that was already flirting with state failure.

That is not because she was credible in the role she scripted for herself as Pakistan's saviour and the spearhead of a democratic restoration. Her preference had been to try to cut a deal with General Pervez Musharraf to join forces in a manipulated transition from his military rule to a regime that left the general as president and his allies in command of the army - with an amnesty for Ms Bhutto from the corruption charges that have clouded her career.

But her violent death leaves a hole in national politics and adds a vicious extra dimension of disintegration to a country that is already falling apart after decades of civilian and military misrule.

The regime of Gen Musharraf, Ms Bhutto's Pakistan People's party, and the Pakistan Muslim League faction of Nawaz Sharif - another ousted former prime minister - now need to set aside personal advantage and rise to the challenge of the emergency facing their country. Little in their records suggests they will. The removal of Ms Bhutto from the equation also leaves the Bush administration adrift.

Washington's commitment to Gen Musharraf as a vital asset in the "war on terror" led it to promote an alliance between the general and Ms Bhutto. This was shortsighted. Rather than support the democratic revival of civil society, seen above all in this year's lawyers' movement against the regime and the vigour of the local

press, the US sought to use Ms Bhutto as a figleaf of democracy - widening further the already extensive circle of her enemies.

Her motorcade was the target of a massive suicide-bombing in Karachi when she returned in October, probably by jihadis who turned against Gen Musharraf this summer.

Her death in Rawalpindi, where her father, the deposed prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was hanged by a previous military regime in 1979, ends the baroque and bloody saga of a political dynasty that also saw two of her brothers perish, one shot, another found dead in southern France in murky circumstances.

Ms Bhutto presented a plausible face of modernity: a young, glamorous woman in a male-dominated society, educated at Oxford and Harvard, fluent in the political idiom of western capitals. But she was also tough and ruthless - south Asian politics is not for the faint-hearted - and the PPP remained more feudal hierarchy than political party under her command.

Her two spells in power in the 1980s and 90s were marked by venality and incompetence - just as Mr Sharif's were - as well as a willingness to temporise with the generals and Islamists. Yet, however badly civilians misruled, Gen Musharraf's marginalising the mainstream PPP and PML offered power not only to the army but gangster politicians and radical Islamists, sinking Pakistan deeper in the mire.

It is in danger of dissolution, with the tribal areas that harbour al-Qaeda in revolt, an increasingly Talibanised Pashtun nationalism ablaze in North West Frontier Province, nationalist insurgency in Balochistan, rekindled ethno-sectarian conflict in Ms Bhutto's Sindh fief, and jihadis openly challenging a state whose institutions have buckled under Gen Musharraf's rule.

The general will no doubt see in this violent turn of events proof of his indispensability. Mr Sharif becomes the unquestioned head of the opposition. A headless PPP will struggle to regroup.

Yet all Pakistan's leaders need to regroup around a national accord, to defeat extremism by restoring the legitimacy of its rulers and the credibility of its institutions. That should be the object of the January 8 elections - even if they are postponed - because the challenge for Pakistan is no less than to restart the process of nation-building.

PAKISTAN AT THE EDGE

The Hindu - 28 December 2007

Editorial

"I am not afraid," Benazir Bhutto declaimed at her father's mausoleum two months ago, "of anyone but Allah." In the last weeks of her life, Benazir demonstrated that she possessed a depth of conviction that was, beyond dispute, exceptional. When she returned to Pakistan earlier this year after long exile, she made clear to family and confidantes that she was well aware of the great dangers lying ahead. She was undeterred by the murderous bombing that greeted her on her return home. During her two tenures as Prime Minister of Pakistan, she was charged by adversaries and critics with corruption, with sponsoring Islamist terrorism directed at India, with dilettantism. Whatever be the truth in relation to these accusations, the Pakistan People's Party chief showed, in word and deed, that she possessed the raw courage needed to set past wrongs right. In his last interview before his execution by the military regime of General Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto said: "I am not afraid of death. I am a man of history and you cannot silence history." Democrats across Pakistan will recall these words as they ponder how best to respond to a despicable act by terrorists who made no secret of their loathing at the prospect of a progressive, secular woman emerging as Pakistan's ruler.

With this body blow to democracy in Pakistan, what is clear is that epic struggles lie ahead

for its hard-pressed people. Some analysts fear the assassination will spell the end of the tentative movement towards democracy witnessed in recent months. While such an outcome will suit the military establishment as well as the Islamists, it will have dangerously destabilising consequences. As Benazir pointed out movingly in a recent interview, "people are just being butchered and it has to stop, somebody has to find a solution and my solution is, let's restore democracy." It was this combination of extraordinary courage and well-reasoned commitment to democracy that made Benazir stand out among Pakistan's political leaders. Her death illustrates in stark relief the failure of Pervez Musharraf's regime, which continues to be underwritten by the United States, to confront al-Qaeda- and Taliban-linked religious neoconservatives who are working to obliterate the last traces of democracy in Pakistan. It is one of the grimmer ironies of history that Benazir was killed at the gates of Rawalpindi's Liaqat Bagh - the very location where a gunman shot dead Prime Minister Liaqat Ali Khan in 1951, an action some believe was provoked by his opposition to clerics' calls for Pakistan to be declared an Islamic state. In the decades since, the country has lurched ever closer towards the abyss. All those who care for its future - and for the future of our shared region - must join hands to ensure it is pulled back from the edge. The Hindu shares the deep grief of the people of Pakistan over this terrible loss during a time of troubles.

P.S.

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