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Bhutto's Assassination and its Aftermath

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Benazir Bhutto's assassination has triggered widespread chaos in Pakistan. Questions are being asked as to who is responsible for her death and what the political and security implications for the country are. National unity is the first step in restoring peace and stability and the resolve in fighting Al-Qaeda and its affiliates.

PAKISTAN HAS been plagued by growing incidents of terrorism at the hands of Al Qaeda and a resurgent Taliban and political strife triggered by President Musharraf's sacking of the Chief Justice of the country in March 2007. The country was plunged further into chaos with the assassination of Benazir Bhutto on 27 December 2007, in the city of Rawalpindi.

Who is responsible for Benazir's assassination? What are the political and security implications of her death for Pakistan? What future course of action should the government adopt in order to rectify the situation?

Who killed her?

The issue of responsibility for the murder of Ms. Bhutto is far from resolved and threatens to exacerbate the already precarious situation in the country if not resolved to the satisfaction of the parties involved.

Al Qaeda was quick to claim responsibility for the murder. An Italian news agency, Adnkronos International, reported that the spokesman for Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, Mustafa Abu Al Yazid alias Abu Saeed al-Masri, claimed responsibility for the attack saying "we have terminated the most precious American asset which vowed to defeat the Mujahiddin (holy warriors)". He said that the decision to assassinate Ms. Bhutto was made by Al Qaeda number two, Dr. Ayman Al Zawahiri in October 2007.

The Interior Ministry of Pakistan placed the blame of Ms. Bhutto's murder on Baitullah Mahsud, a

Taliban commander and Al Qaeda sympathiser from the South Waziristan tribal area and leader of the recently formed Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (Taliban Movement Pakistan). This is an umbrella organisation of several Islamic militant groups. As evidence, the spokesman for the interior ministry produced a transcript of what he alleged was an intercept from a telephone conversation between Baitullah Mahsud and a cleric from Waziristan, in which they congratulated each other on the death of Benazir. Baitullah's spokesman Maulvi Omer, however, denied the allegations. The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) also denied the government's claim and called for an independent inquiry into the incident by the United Nations.

Al Qaeda stands to benefit most from the instability in Pakistan as it would allow them breathing space from the onslaught of Pakistani security forces. The use of a sniper and suicide bomber for the assassination bears the hallmark of Al Qaeda-trained local operatives. They are known to have carried out a number of acts of terror in Pakistan, including assassination attempts on President Musharraf and bombings near the US consulate in Karachi.

President Musharraf took a step in the right direction by announcing to seek assistance from the Scotland Yard in investigating the murder. Given the escalating violence in the country, resulting partly from the government's mishandling of the issue, this would put to rest the circulation of conspiracy theories in the country regarding the government's involvement in the assassination and help restore calm.

Political Implication

The death of Ms. Bhutto is likely to have a deep impact on the political situation in Pakistan, both short term and long term and will, in part, depend on how the government deals with the emerging situation.

In the short term President Musharraf and the Pakistani army stand to gain from the death of Ms. Bhutto, as does the PPP. The long term beneficiary, however, may be the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) (PML-N) led by former PM Nawaz Sharif.

The US was banking on post-election cooperation between Benazir and Musharraf to defeat the militant elements in Pakistan and Afghanistan. With Benazir's death, Musharraf remains the only leader in Pakistan with secular credentials acceptable to the US. The US, therefore, is likely to mute its calls for a hasty return to 'undiluted democracy' and accept a significant role for the Pakistan Army and Musharraf in post-election Pakistan. Similarly, the Pakistan Army is likely to prefer the status quo and continue with its support for Musharraf rather than risk further instability by removing him from power.

Man to watch: Nawaz Sharif

The postponement of elections from January 8 to February 18 was inevitable. In an atmosphere of fear and violence and the destruction of public and private property in the aftermath of Ms. Bhutto's death, it was practically impossible for the Election Commission to hold free and fair elections on the earlier date. The next logical step for the government would be to consult the major political parties of the country and allay their fears regarding foul play in the coming elections. This can be done by independence of judiciary, removing the curbs on media and neutralisation of the Election Commission.

The PPP seems to have recovered well from the death of its leader, although it might face problems in the future. It is likely to benefit in the coming elections from the sympathy wave generated for Ms. Bhutto. Leadership crisis in the party was resolved, at least for the time being, with the appointment of Benazir's 19-year-old son Bilawal Zardari as the Chairman of the party and her husband Asif Zardari -

a controversial figure in Pakistani politics - as the regent until Bilawal completes his education. Its future in Pakistani politics would, however, be determined by its post-election working relationship with Musharraf and the Pakistan Army, and acceptability by PPP's rank-and-file of Asif Zardari's leadership of the party.

Nawaz Sharif is the man to watch for in the future. At this critical moment in the history of Pakistan, the country needs a leader who can unite the federation and rally the people in the fight against terror. After Ms. Bhutto's death he remains the only leader of national stature in Pakistan. His relationship with the Pakistani Army has remained somewhat estranged in the recent past and he is likely to continue with his anti-establishment rhetoric till the elections. However, a post-election arrangement between his party, the PML-N, and the military establishment cannot be ruled out.

Security Implications

Benazir's assassination can have negative as well as positive implications for security in Pakistan. It has resulted in increased violence in the country, especially her home province of Sindh. Consequently, Musharraf was forced to announce deployment of armed forces, at least until the time of elections, to restore peace.

The US and other Western nations have expressed concerns, though unfounded, regarding the security of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal and its willingness and ability to win the fight against Al Qaeda and its affiliates. These concerns stem from the prevailing political instability in the country rather than any flaws in the measures adopted by the Pakistani state to safeguard its nuclear weapons from theft and sabotage.

Political stability and support of the population are vital in counter insurgency operations. Pakistan can channel the public anger that was generated by Ms. Bhutto's death towards hatred for the extremists by holding a transparent inquiry into her death, with the help of Scotland Yard. A free and responsible media can play a vital role in mobilising public opinion against the militants. Restoration of democracy by holding free and fair elections and strengthening public institutions would bring an end to political instability in the country.

At this time of crisis, the Pakistani nation can ill afford disunity among its ranks. It is time for the government to bring everyone on board, including the religious parties, mollify the aggrieved, forge national unity and step up its push against Al Qaeda.

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