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Benazir's Assassination: Lingering Mystery Casts Doubt

By Moonis Ahmar

Synopsis

The continued mystery of Benazir Bhutto's assassination raises questions about the PPP-led government's commitment to solving the crime. It will also cause a setback to Pakistan's counter-terrorism efforts.

Commentary

THREE YEARS after the assassination of Pakistan's former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in December 2007 the question of who was responsible remains a mystery. The release of a United Nations Commission report on her death in December 2010 has prompted fresh questions about the role of Pakistan's military agencies in the investigation of the killing. Further the PPP-led government and Benazir's husband President Asif Ali Zardari have been accused of failing to bring to book those involved in the attack.

UN Commission Report

The UN Commission report, presented to the UN Secretary-General in March 2010, noted serious security lapses in regard to Benazir's protection and the attempts after her killing to eliminate important evidence from the scene. The report accused former Director-General of Military Intelligence, Maj-Gen Nadeem Ijaz and some top police officers of being involved in cleaning up the site of the attack on Benazir soon after the incident.

Two senior police officials of Rawalpindi, City Police Officer Saud Aziz and Superintendent Khurram Shahzad, who were detained and handed over the Anti-terrorism Court, had admitted that they were in contact with four or five high-ranking army officers belonging to the two military security agencies, Military Intelligence (MI) and the Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI), after the gun and bomb attack on Bhutto. According to the Public Prosecutor, Chaudhry Zulfikar, both detained police officers claimed that the decision to hose down the site was taken under the directive of top military intelligence officials. The UN report stated that "hosing down the crime scene so soon after the blast goes beyond mere incompetence; it is up to the relevant authorities to determine whether this amounts to criminal responsibility."

Military's Reaction

On 25 December 2010 Pakistan's leading English newspaper DAWN carried a strong reaction of the military establishment to the UN report. The Director-General of the Inter-Service Public Relations (ISPR) stated: "We have conveyed our reservations with special reference to security-related issues to the government and asked it to record a protest with the UN." The Army considered the report an attempt to malign a national institution

(ISI) and that the UN Commission went beyond its mandate by accusing ISI of conducting covert operations in India and Afghanistan.

It is recalled that the government, then headed by President Pervez Musharraf, had held Baitullah Mehsud, head of the defunct Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, responsible for the assassination of Benazir, which Mehsud promptly denied. While fingers in Pakistan were pointed at General Musharraf for the attack, the UN Commission report held Musharraf responsible for not neutralising security threats to Benazir. However Musharraf was given an honourable exit by the PPP-led government when he stepped down as president in August 2008 and was allowed to leave the country. No further attempt has been made by the government to bring him back for questioning.

Mistrust behind mystery

Behind the mystery of Benazir's assassination is the age-old mistrust between the military and PPP. It is widely perceived in Pakistan that the military's top leadership has always been suspicious of and even hostile to the PPP leaders ever since its founding by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Benazir's father. However Benazir reached a deal with President Musharraf in 2007 which paved the way for her return to Pakistan in October 2007 and the dropping of corruption/criminal cases against her and her husband. Nevertheless Benazir hit out at Musharraf when he imposed a state of emergency and detained many judges of the superior court a month later.

PPP supporters have questioned the commitment of the government to punish those involved in the attack on Benazir. Her political secretary Naheed Khan, who, with her husband Senator Safdar Abbasi, was in the vehicle in which Benazir was travelling, accused the PPP-led government of failing to find Benazir's killers. Others asked why the government had been unable to act even though Benazir's husband, President Zardari, had claimed to know who had assassinated her. (Naheed's bitter attacks against President Zardari have led to her PPP membership being suspended).

The reluctance of President Zardari and the PPP-led government to pursue the inquiry of Benazir's assassination to its conclusion will only deepen the mystery and create doubts about the party's prospects in the next general election. However if the government were to put on trial those military intelligence officials who influenced police officers to eliminate the evidence of Benazir's murder, it would drive deeper the wedge between the PPP and the military establishment. On the other hand one could expect a serious setback to Pakistan's counter-terrorism efforts if those responsible for the terrorist attack on Benazir are not apprehended and punished soon.

Moonis Ahmar is Visiting Research Fellow with the South Asia Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University and Professor of International Relations, University of Karachi.