

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

The Assassination of Benazir Bhutto

Teresita C. Shaffer

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Q1: What is the impact of Benazir Bhutto's assassination? Who killed her?

A1: Benazir Bhutto's assassination has sent shock waves through Pakistan. Her party, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), is the largest in Pakistan. Her murder creates a situation where none of the most prominent political leaders in Pakistan is actually a candidate. It has brought the major opposition parties together in their determination to challenge President Pervez Musharraf.

The government blames a pro-Taliban tribal leader, Baitullah Mehsud, for the assassination, but many Pakistanis, especially in Bhutto's party, believe that the government and the army were at least indirectly responsible. The government's statements have been inconsistent and, in one case, at variance with photos taken at the time of the murder. This creates a corrosive mistrust that will make it extremely difficult to conduct decent elections.

Q2: What are U.S. interests in Pakistan?

A2: The United States has two major interests: sustaining Pakistani support for antiterrorism efforts in Afghanistan and on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, and ensuring that the Pakistani government has the strength and legitimacy to govern effectively, not just now but in the years to come.

Q3: Does democracy matter?

A3: Yes. The U.S. government wants to see stability in Pakistan and a legitimate and effective government in Islamabad. The government can keep down street disturbances by throwing people in jail, and by other repressive measures. But the Musharraf government is deeply unpopular, and simply repressing public sentiment and putting curbs on public assembly and the media will not alleviate the pressures it faces. Pakistanis have experienced genuine elections. The kind of stability Pakistan needs can only come from a government that is seen as legitimate and that can deliver the goods. That's why it is important to move to free and fair elections.

Q4: What will happen now? Will Pakistan be able to hold elections?

A4: The elections have now been rescheduled for February 18. Both major opposition parties objected to this postponement but have now confirmed that they will participate.

To ensure a fair election, the government will need to make some major changes. These could include: filling the vacancies on the election commission with people acceptable to the opposition as well as to the government; replacing the partisan local administration; bringing opposition personalities into the interim government; and restoring an independent judiciary. President Musharraf will be very reluctant to make these adjustments. If he does not, however, there will be continued unrest.

Musharraf announced on January 2 that he is deploying the army to keep order. This means that, contrary to the situation in recent months, the army will have to take direct responsibility for public order.

Q5: If a party other than Musharraf's wins the election, will he share power?

A5: Whoever commands a majority in the newly elected government should be named prime minister, according to Pakistan's Constitution. If this is a person opposed to President Musharraf, one can expect a rather uncomfortable division of power among three main personalities: the president, the prime minister, and the chief of army staff. How this works in practice depends on how those three relate to one another, how strong the prime minister's majority is, and whether there is continuing disorder in the streets.

Q6: Is the army going to remain the major player in Pakistani politics?

A6: As long as civilian authority is weak, it certainly will. The army is the country's strongest institution, and generals have governed Pakistan for over half of its independent life, which has impeded Pakistan's political development.

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Musharraf will remain very close to the army, but since his retirement as head of the army in November, he is no longer in active command, and the new army chief, General Ashfaq Kiyani, will ultimately have to make decisions. The army is disciplined and hierarchical and loyal to its chief. There is precedent, however, for the army leadership removing former military officers from power when they no longer seem to be able to run the government.

Q7: Where does this leave Pakistan's antiterrorism policy?

A7: As long as there is a threat of major disturbances, the Pakistani government and army will be preoccupied with the domestic law and order situation. Antiterrorism policy, both in the border areas near Afghanistan and elsewhere in Pakistan, will be a lower priority.

President Musharraf and Afghan president Hamid Karzai just concluded an unusually productive meeting to try to agree on ways of ending pro-Taliban movement across their porous border. But this is tough under the best of circumstances, and the Pakistan government has been ambivalent about how high a profile it wants to take in the largely ungoverned tribal border areas.

Q8: Is the problem of extremist violence in Pakistan confined to the border areas?

A8: No. There has been a spate of extremist violence in other parts of Pakistan. For the past two months, there have been two to three suicide bombings a week, many directed against army targets. A radical cleric and his vigilantes have been taking and holding territory in parts of the country. In November, the Pakistani army was sent into the Swat Valley to try to flush extremists out of towns where they had taken control. The army has announced that it made considerable progress in this area. In the next few weeks, it will be important to see if this military move is accompanied by a political initiative.

Teresita C. Schaffer directs the South Asia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.

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