

Benazir Bhutto assassination sparks mass protests

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Global Research, December 29, 2007
[Left Click](#) 29 December 2007

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December 29, 2007 (7am)—Pakistan has never seen so many people protesting in streets all over as been the case during the last two days. They were all united across Pakistan to condemn the brutal murder of Benazir Bhutto. The news was heard with a great shock and there was an immediate mass anger erupted in all parts of Pakistan. December 28 was the first day of a general strike called by many groups ranging from political parties to various professional groups.

Most of elections posters, banners, flags and billboards of Pakistan Muslim League (PMLQ) were the first victim of the mass anger. PMLQ is a General Musharaf creation after 1999; a major split from the Pakistan Muslim League. The rest is headed by Nawaz Sharif, the former prime minister. PMLQ has shared power with General Musharaf since 2002 and is comprised of the most corrupt feudalists, capitalists, former army generals and black marketeers.

Mass Reaction

PMLQ had spent billions on these advertising materials, and all that was gone within few hours of mass reaction. It was very proudly claiming that it has done the homework. The work to remove all this anti-people election material was done with utmost sophistication. None of Pakistan Peoples Party or Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz election material was removed.

Then it was the banks, mainly in Sind. They were attacked, and the buildings were burned in many cities of Sind. Most of ATM machines were destroyed. In some places, people were lucky to bring some money home. Banks had made unprecedented profits during the last few years. There was no free banking any more as had been the case earlier from sixties.

Hundreds of private buses were burned in all parts of the country. The fares had gone too high during Musharaf's eight years of rule. There were no more public buses. Most of PMLQ government ministers had their own bus companies and were making huge gains out of mass poverty.

There were also incidents of burning of railway trains in Sind. According to *Daily Jang*, 28 railway stations, 13 railway engines, and seven trains have been burnt, resulting in over three billion rupees [\$50 million] loss. The rail fares were increased by many folds by Musharaf regime in a bid to reduce the railway losses. It has been partly privatized as well. The whole rail system has collapsed since the night of December 27. Thousands of passengers are on the railway stations waiting for restoration. There is no sign of restoration for some days. Pakistan International Airlines PIA and two private airlines, Air Blue and Shaheen Air, have cancelled all their domestic flights on the name of "rescheduling." The staff did not turn up.

Thousands of private cars have been damaged all over Pakistan by the angry mob, mainly youth. They were showing their anger on the car companies' (mainly Toyota, Suzuki and Honda) unprecedented profits during the last few years. Many leasing companies have robbed the growing middle classes by offering cars with abnormal prices, while the massive majority of population have no more subsidized public transport.

The houses and offices of PMLQ politicians, local government's mayors and administration are the other victims of the mass reaction. They have either been burnt or damaged.

Over 100 people have so far died in the incidents relation to mass protest, either by police or by cross firing of different groups during the last 40 hours.

Slogans against Musharaf and Washington

Thousands and thousands have raised slogans against Musharaf regime and American imperialism after the death of Benazir Bhutto. The anger was accumulated during the last eight years and was manifested after this unthinkable incident. This was a response of the masses to the strict implementation of neoliberal agenda, which resulted in unprecedented price hike, unemployment and poverty. The anger that was to be shown in boycotting or participating in the elections has come out early after the assassination of Benazir Bhutto.

There is a great anti-Musharaf consciousness all over. It is been shown in different ways in different part of the country in different degree. The so-called capitalist economic growth under Musharaf has left millions in absolute poverty. There was no "Pakistan shining" as was propagated by the dictatorship all the times.

The 2007 has been a year of mass awakening. It started with advocate [lawyer] movement after the removal of chief justice of Supreme Court of Pakistan. The chief justice Iftikhar Choudry said a big "No" to resigning under pressure by the Generals. He was removed only to be reinstated on July 20 after a massive movement of 80,000 lawyer's community. They were joined by political activists from almost all political parties but not by the masses. The masses only welcomed the chief justice from the side roads and did not participate in the movement in real terms.

Musharaf got himself elected as president for the second five-year term in a "democratic manner" by a parliament elected for one five-year term. He was still wearing a military uniform when elected as "civilian" president. His theme was "elect me president for the second term and I will take off uniform after taking oath as civilian president."

Lawyer's movement

The November imposition of martial law on the name of emergency was used to remove the rather independent top judges of Pakistan. It put restrictions on the media, and over 10,000 were arrested. Musharaf got himself duly "elected president" and took off his uniform after removing the top judges. His hand-picked judges gave him all the necessary backing. He was helped in this process by Benazir Bhutto, who was forced into (in Tariq Ali's word) a "forced arranged marriage" by U.S. and British imperialism. In this unholy alliance, every one was cheating everyone with utmost honesty.

The general elections were announced for January 8 and the emergency lifted after the large-scale repression and removal of independent judiciary. The regime was happy that

everything is going according to “plan.” The Pakistan Peoples Party of Benazir Bhutto and Muslim League Nawaz and Quid Azam (PMLQ), the three major parties, had agreed to participate in these fraudulent elections. The religious fundamentalist political alliance MMA had split on the question of participation in elections. One major part of MMA had gone to contest elections.

The campaign for and boycott the election had started when the religious fundamentalists struck and killed Benazir Bhutto on December 27 evening. The “plan” was shattered into pieces. It was big blow to agreed terms and conditions of various participating parties in the elections. It was not a bump on the road but a total destruction of the road of conciliations and compromises.

The murder of Benazir Bhutto is a double-edged sword. While it is big blow to the plans of British and American imperialism, it will also be no celebration for the religious fundamentalist forces. The initial anger has gone against the military regime and its crony politicians. It can go against the both. No party will be able to celebrate the shocking killings.

But Musharaf regime has understood this clearly and now is trying consciously to put the direction of the movement against the religious fundamentalists. Last night on December 28, in a two-hour press conference, a military brigadier representing the government named Baitullah Mehsud, an Al-Qaeda associate in tribal areas of Pakistan, as the one who carried out the attack.

Foolishly he tried his best to prove that Benazir Bhutto was not killed by a bullet but by the lever of sun roof of the bullet proof car while Benazir Bhutto was waving to crowds outside after the bomb blast. What difference it makes, if it is proved that Benazir Bhutto is killed not by the bullet but by another way? Not much.

The military brigadier’s explanation did not satisfy the angry journalists who asked him again and again about the connections of secret intelligence agencies of Pakistan with Abdullah Mahsood. The question of why Mahsood released quietly over 200 Pakistan army men on the day of imposition of emergency, who were kidnapped by his group a week earlier, went unanswered. The military Inter Services Intelligence ISI has a long-time relationship with the religious fundamentalist groups dating back to eighties, when imperialists and fundamentalists were close friends.

Volatile, dangerous and capricious

It is very volatile, unstable, unpredictable, explosive, dangerous, impulsive, fickle and capricious political situation. It never happened before in many years that mass reaction has erupted to this degree.

The general strike was a total success. All roads were empty. No traffic at all. All shops were closed. All industrial and other institutions were completely shut down.

After the initial inhibition to curb the strike, the regime has now issued strict orders to kill anyone on the spot if it is “looting” anything. It has called the regular army in 16 districts of Sind and paramilitary forces elsewhere in Pakistan.

The regime has so far not postponed the scheduled elections but it is very difficult to hold elections in this situation. Muslim League Nawaz and several other political parties have

already announced to boycott the fraudulent elections.

Labour Party Pakistan is demanding an immediate resignation of the Musharaf dictatorship and formation of an interim government comprising of civil society organizations, trade unions and peasant organizations. This is to hold free and fair general elections under an independent election commission. It is demanding an immediate restoration of top judges and investigations of the murder of Benazir and others in this and previous bomb blasts by these top judges. As part of All Parties Democratic Movement, LPP is supporting a three-day general strike and linking it to the overthrow of the military dictatorship. It is asking all parties to reject the general elections fraud on January 8 and to not participate in these elections.

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