

Pakistan: Violent state repression of protests over Bhutto assassination

By [Keith Jones](#)

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Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf on Saturday ordered the military and other security forces to take whatever measures were necessary to quell rioting sparked by last Thursday's assassination of Pakistan People's Party (PPP) leader, former prime minister and current prime ministerial candidate Benazir Bhutto.

Musharraf directed that persons involved in rioting be charged under Pakistan's notorious Anti-Terrorism Act. Military forces had already been deployed on the streets of major Pakistani cities, especially in Bhutto's native province of Sindh. On Friday, the entire country was shut down by a general strike.

Press reports Sunday said the death toll from rioting was at least 44, but failed to provide a breakdown as to the number of persons who died at the hands of the police and military.

The rioters targeted business and symbols of the government, including government buildings, police posts, railway stations and election commission offices, as well as the offices and homes of politicians associated with the Pakistan Muslim League (Q), the military-sponsored, pro-Musharraf party.

Although Bhutto was participating in the national and provincial assembly elections scheduled for January 8, she had repeatedly accused the Musharraf regime of preparing to rig the elections and had pointed to a vast number of irregularities. She had complained that the local government bodies charged with supervising the elections remain in the hands of toadies of the military regime.

Most Pakistanis hold Pakistan's US-backed military government responsible for Bhutto's death. If it, or elements in Pakistan's military-intelligence apparatus, did not directly organize the assassination, they facilitated it by failing to provide Bhutto with elementary security.

Bhutto herself had repeatedly complained that the government refused to meet her basic security requests, including the provision of full security support, armoured vehicles, and bomb-jamming equipment. She had publicly charged elements in the military-intelligence apparatus, although not Musharraf himself, with being responsible for an attempt on her life on October 18 that killed 140 people.

The *Washington Post* cited a 30-year-old truck driver as saying of the anti-government protests, "These are the sentiments of the people. This is their natural reaction."

Popular sentiment against the regime has only hardened in recent days as numerous

contradictions have emerged in the government's account of how Bhutto was assassinated. The Bush administration, meanwhile, has rallied around Musharraf, absolving the dictator and Pakistan's military-intelligence apparatus of any responsibility for Bhutto's death. The Pakistani military has been a close ally of the Pentagon for the past five decades.

Musharraf's government has provided pivotal support to the US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and otherwise supported Washington's geopolitical aims in Central and South Asia and the Middle East, earning the military commander who took power in a 1999 coup the Bush administration's laurels as a "key ally in the war on terror." In recent weeks, Musharraf has allowed for a contingent of US Special Forces said to be several hundred strong to begin operating in Pakistan, where they are to take the leading role in efforts to stamp out support within Pakistan for those fighting against the US occupation regime in Afghanistan.

Predictably, the Bush administration and the pliant US media have taken up the Musharraf regime's refrain that the assassination was the work solely of Islamicist extremists. This ignores the decades-long ties between Pakistan's military-security apparatus and radical Islamic fundamentalist groups, including the Taliban and Al Qaeda, and the intense hostility of the military toward Bhutto and her PPP.

Benazir Bhutto's father, Zulfikhar Ali Bhutto, who led Pakistan for six years in the 1970s, was deposed in a military coup in 1977 and hanged under the US-backed military dictator General Zia-ul Haq two years later.

When asked on Friday whether Washington would continue to support Musharraf, US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher made it clear that withdrawal of US backing was out of the question. "The option is to fight or not to fight terrorism," he said.

Boucher also took exception to a reporter's suggestion that the Musharraf regime had failed to adequately protect Bhutto. "I think that starts to pre-judge what happened on Thursday," he said. A Pentagon spokesman took a similar line Saturday, declaring, "I don't know how foolproof you can make any security when people are willing to kill themselves."

Initial reports, including from the Pakistani government, said Bhutto, on leaving a campaign rally in Rawalpindi, had been shot just before a suicide-bomber blew himself up. But on Friday, Interior Ministry spokesman Brigadier Javed Iqbal Cheema asserted that Bhutto had not been hit by any bullets. Rather, he said Bhutto died as a result of hitting her head on a lever on the sun roof of the car in which she was riding. Bhutto was standing and waving to PPP supporters when the attack began.

Cheema's claims have been challenged by eye witnesses. Farooq Naik, Bhutto's principal lawyer and himself a senior PPP leader, called the government claims "baseless" and "a pack of lies."

He said, "Two bullets hit her, one in the abdomen and one in the head. Bhutto's personal secretary Neheed Khan and party official Makhdoom Amin Fahim were in the car and they saw what happened."

Sherry Rehman, a PPP spokesperson who travelled with Bhutto to the Rawalpindi hospital where she died, and who later prepared her body for burial, told Reuters that Bhutto "has a bullet wound at the back of her head on the left side. It came out the other (side). That was

a very large wound, and she bled profusely through that.”

Rehman continued, “She was even bleeding while we were bathing her for the burial. The government is now trying to say she concussed herself, which is ludicrous. It is really dangerous nonsense.”

The government’s version of event is also manifestly at odds with a videotape shown on Dawn News TV Saturday evening. Shot by an amateur photographer, the video shows an armed assassin shooting at Bhutto while she waves to the crowd through the sunroof of her car. It also clearly shows that Bhutto had disappeared into the car before the bomb blast, and that there was no security cordon around her vehicle.

Yet the Musharraf regime is determined to stick with its bizarre explanation of Bhutto’s death. “We gave you absolute facts... corroborated by the doctor’s report,” said Cheema on Saturday.

According to a *New York Times* on-line report posted Sunday, “Pakistani and Western security experts... believed the government’s insistence that Ms. Bhutto was not killed by a bullet was designed to deflect attention from the lack of government security around her vehicle as she left the park in the city [Rawalpindi] where the Pakistani Army keeps its headquarters, and where the powerful Inter Services Intelligence agency has a strong presence...”

But there are other explanations. Shooting a person in a crowd—there have also been reports of a sniper—demands a higher degree of skill and training than detonating a suicide bomb. Death by shooting involves bullets and a murder weapon, both of which may provide significant clues as to the origins of the assassination plot.

In this regard, it is also important to note that within minutes of Bhutto’s assassination, authorities ordered the crime scene hosed down. The water wiped away blood stains and, with them, potentially crucial DNA evidence that might have identified the suicide-bomber.

That the government is lying to the Pakistani people is demonstrated by an open letter issued by Athar Minallah, a member of Rawalpindi General Hospital’s board of directors. Minallah explains that Dr. Mohammad Mussadiq Khan, a professor of surgery at the hospital, had determined the evening of Bhutto’s death that its cause was a bullet wound. But he had not put that in his medical report because, under Pakistani law, only an autopsy can determine the cause of death. Despite protests from the attending physicians, Rawalpindi Chief of Police Aziz Saud had refused, however, to order one.

As for the government’s claim that a leader of Pakistan’s Taliban, Baitullah Mehsud, masterminded the assassination, it has been publicly disputed by a spokesman for Mehsud and the authorities have provided no evidence whatsoever in support of their claim. Since he humiliated the military last summer by organizing the capture of 300 Pakistani troops in Waziristan, Mehsud has been blamed by the government for a series of attacks, including the October 18 attempt to kill Bhutto.

PPP spokesman Farhatullah Babar said the claim that Mehsud was the author of Bhutto’s murder appears to be “a planted story, an incorrect story, because they want to divert attention.”

So full of holes is the Pakistan government’s story, the Bush administration is itself worried

that it is fuelling popular sentiment against the regime and discrediting Musharraf's American sponsors. A major debate is apparently underway within the Bush administration as to whether it should urge Islamabad allow an international investigation of the assassination.

For several days after Bhutto's murder the Bush administration was insisting that the elections should go ahead as scheduled on January 8 despite the killing of the most important opposition leader.

The elections were bogus from the beginning. They were "prepared" by a six-week state of emergency during which Musharraf purged the judiciary so as to remove all legal-constitutional impediments to his being re-elected as president. Under the emergency decree, Musharraf ordered thousands of arrests and introduced draconian censorship laws and restrictions on political activity that remain in effect.

But to now claim that an election following the assassination of the chief opposition figure, with the regime itself widely suspected of complicity, would be "an exercise in democracy" is laughable.

It now appears that the Election Commission will decide Monday to postpone the elections, possibly for up to four months.

For more than a year, the Bush administration has been seeking to prevent the increasingly unpopular Musharraf regime from unravelling by erecting a democratic façade. This focused on a push for a power-sharing deal between Musharraf and Bhutto and her PPP.

Bhutto, for her part, was more than willing, in return for a share of the spoils of office, to work with Washington, the sponsor of a succession of military dictatorships in Pakistan, and Musharraf, whose government, in addition to throttling the Pakistani people's democratic rights, has imposed socially incendiary neo-liberal policies.

In the wake of Musharraf's emergency and now Bhutto's assassination, the creation of a democratic fig leaf for Musharraf's dictatorship remains the Bush administration's policy. According to an article in Sunday's *Washington Post*, "Despite anxiety among intelligence officials and experts... the administration is only slightly tweaking a course charted over the past 18 months to support the creation of a political center revolving around Musharraf..."

"'Plan A still has to work,' said a senior administration official involved in Pakistan policy. 'We all have to appeal to moderate forces to come together and carry the election and create a more solidly based government, then use that as a platform to fight the terrorists.'"

Toward this end, Boucher, US Undersecretary for Political Affairs Nicolas Burns and other US officials have pressed Pakistan's other major opposition party, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), to backtrack on the decision it announced in the wake of Bhutto's assassination to boycott the elections.

According to the *Post*, the US's other objective is to prevent the disintegration of the PPP, whose election campaign revolved entirely around the personal appeal of "chairperson for life" Benazir Bhutto and invocations of her "martyred" father's legacy.

Meeting Sunday, the PPP executive chose Benazir Bhutto's 19-year-old son, Bilawal Bhutto, an Oxford university student, as PPP chairman. Bhutto's husband, Asif Ali Zardari, who

earned the nickname “Mr. 10 Percent” because of the kickbacks he extracted while serving as investment minister in Benazir Bhutto’s second cabinet, will serve as PPP co-chair.

The dynastic character of the PPP’s succession underscores the anti-democratic nature of the party. While the PPP has in the past projected itself as an “Islamic socialist party” and today still claims to be the party of Pakistan’s toilers, the Bhuttos themselves are one of the great landowning families of Sindh, whose rural regions are infamous for the feudal-type oppression that still prevails.

Zardari let it be known that the PPP will still contest the elections, whenever they are held. Showing that class interests are thicker than blood, he made an open appeal to the military, saying that the PPP’s struggle is with “a section of people in the government,” not the armed forces. He also denounced those who had raised Sindh separatist slogans at the funeral of his wife.

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