



COMMENTARY

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The Security Impact of the Bhutto Assassination

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Political stability is only one of the unanswered questions growing out of the Bhutto assassination. The assassination of Bhutto or any other leading Pakistani opposition leader, would push Pakistan to the edge of civil conflict if there was any suspicion that Musharraf had any role in it such an action or that the Musharraf government knew of plans for an attempt and did not provide the maximum possible security.

Much will depend on whether some Islamist extremist movement announces that it committed the attack, but even then a substantial number of Pakistanis will still see the Musharraf government as being at least indirectly involved, and there would be a flood of destabilizing conspiracy theories. The question is just how bad this will be?

Much will depend on who, if any one, takes responsibility for the killings. If the Taliban, al Qa'ida or some Islamist extremist group does, it could have a unifying impact and direct anger towards the forces doing most to drive Pakistan apart and threaten Afghanistan. If it is a Pakistani sect or ethnic group, it could be far more divisive. If no one makes a claim or the movement is unknown, it will probably fuel anti-Musharraf conspiracy theories -- particularly if the government cracks down and does not provide convincing transparency as to its actions.

The unfortunate reality is that the combined history of a de facto Musharraf coup and months of rising tensions in Pakistan make any major assassination potentially far more destabilizing than in the past, could bring down the government over time, and will create probably months of instability and tension even if the government survived.

There are also a number of wild cards that are still to be played:

--Will Pakistan's leaders seek some new consensus, or divide and criticize each other while attempting to exploit the situation?

--Will the elections still be held and under what conditions?

--Can Sharif take Bhutto's place and will Musharraf allow it?

--Does Bhutto have a clear and powerful successor?

--Will Musharraf seek political consensus or crack down?

--How good was government security for Bhutto? Are there reasons for doubt?

--How will the Pakistani armed forces react over time, and will they emerge as having a more independent voice?

--What will Pakistani attitudes be towards the US? Have they become more favorable after the Bush Administration took a higher profile in pushing for democracy?

--If any movement does take responsibility for the assassination, will it be al Qa'ida, some Islamist movement, or an unknown. Will it move the Pakistani people towards hostility to Islamist extremists or leave the question unanswered?

It may take weeks or months before the answers to all these questions are fully clear. About the only question that does not seem critical is the security of nuclear weapons. They are not stored where public riots or demonstrations can affect them, and there is no reason the military should become unstable or their security should be compromised.

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